

The God of Another Way

Matthew 2:1-13

There are two kinds of travelers. There are those that pack two days ahead of departure, and those that throw things together at the last minute.

The travelers that pack two days ahead of departure prepare a meticulous triptick, map out the roads they will take, note the stops they'll make along the way, pack first-aid kits, extra socks and underwear, tuck energy bars, fruits, and water bottles into every aperture they can find in their luggage.

Their cell phones are fully charged, and they have charging cords for every electronic device they carry—all with car adapters as well. Any of those kinds of travelers here this morning?

The travelers who throw things together at the last minute are the rest of you – no need raise your hands. You scrape clothes off the bedroom floor and chair (some clean/some not), stuff it into a suitcase, grab the car keys and go.

No toothbrush? Pick one up on the road. No map? More fun to just head in some general direction (“north”) and see what comes their way. Side roads, cut-offs, short-cuts, long-cuts, detours are all part of the adventure. For these travelers there may be an ultimate destination in mind. But wherever they find themselves they are never “lost”—just getting where they are going by a different route.

These two types of travelers can also be described as “traveling with children” and “traveling without children.” Anybody know what I’m talking about? And both types of travelers are susceptible to having their luggage lost. How do you survive a well planned trip when your well packed suitcase is vacationing without you? How do you survive without your stuff? Anyone had that happen to you?

We all have from time to time. And guess what? We survived just fine. It’s amazing what you can do without. It’s amazing how little we really need to go through life. You really don’t need life’s “stuffing.”

But let’s get real here this morning: For most of us it’s not “doing without” *things* that frightens us. It’s doing without power. It’s doing without knowledge. It’s doing without control. That’s what’s scary about New Years.

Here’s what I think: for people who make New Year’s resolutions (eat less, run more, drink little, smoke nothing) it’s less about changing behaviors or improving themselves and more to about convincing themselves that they have power and control over a year that spreads out before them like a 365-day-long question mark.

By making resolutions they face the fear and panic of the future by pretending the New Year will bring exactly what they tell it to.

The truth is - none of us know what awaits us in 2019. We can make plans. We can arrange itineraries. We can pack luggage. But no one can predict the future.

- The truth is - some of you listening to these words won’t be here next year.
- The truth is - some of your jobs will disappear by the time we sit in this service next year.
- The truth is - some of you will get promotions and job offers you never dreamed possible.

- The truth is - nature will bring this world calamities that we can't even imagine.
- The truth is - some of the best moments, and best meals, and best memories of your entire life will occur this next year.
- The truth is - great fortune and great tragedy, inexplicable and undeserved, will strike next year.

We cannot know our future. But we can know better the One who holds our future in His hand, and hone our physical and spiritual “survival skills” for whatever comes.

Biologists say that the key to survival of any species is one word: adaptability. As cute and photogenic as panda bears may be, they are lousy adapters. They only eat one thing: bamboo. They only live in one place: bamboo forests. They only eat one way: alone. Take a panda bear and turn him loose in the habitat of his black bear cousin, and he will starve to death. When the bamboo forests are gone the panda will be gone too.

Human beings have always been the stars of adaptability. Unlike the monotonous diet of the pandas, we are omnivores. We literally eat anything and everything. We have figured out how to survive in frozen tundras, equatorial forests, scorching deserts, and soggy swamplands. Do you think you'll be able to survive in whatever landscapes 2019 brings you?

In this week's text from Matthew, adaptation strategies abound. First, **notice how the “bad guy” adapts**. Herod the Great had already adapted himself—a half-Edomite—into being “King of the Jews.” Now he hears unexpected, chilling news. Wandering astrologer priests from the East arrive at his court eagerly seeking a newborn “king of the Jews.”

Good at astrology but bad at politics, these not-so-wise-men make this announcement in front of the current “king of the Jews,” shifting Herod's already paranoid mind into high gear.

But Herod adapts quickly. He sends the local priests and scribes to pinpoint the birthplace of this predicted messiah and then cleverly sends the magi on their way, letting them use their skills to follow the astrological signs and so locate the child. Herod plans to adapt the magi's homage into homicide, and when they reveal to him where to find this rival “king,” Herod will kill this young child and reestablish his own self-declared title of “king of the Jews.”

But **the “good guys” adapt too**. The magi accept the news that Jerusalem is not their final destination and start out on another journey. Being guided by a miraculous star is astounding - but having to travel at night is downright dangerous.

When they finally reach the house of Joseph and see the long-sought child, think of how they must have reacted. Such a long trip only to arrive at such a simple surrounding—no royal gilded palace, just a humble stone house. But the magi adapt and celebrate anyway, recognizing the child's royalty with the blue-blooded gifts they have brought--gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And just as the magi think there are no more surprises, they adapt again to a dream that warns them to not return to Herod but to go home “by another way” (v.12). And in order to avoid Herod (the self-avowed “King of the Jews”), his soldiers, his spies, and his jurisdiction, they go “another way.”

“Another way” is another way of saying “out of the way.” To skirt Herod's sphere of influence would have required a daunting detour. But, firmly trusting in dreams (“God's

forgotten language”), the magi strike out into unknown territory without a guiding star above to show the way.

Finally, **the biggest adapter of them all is Joseph**. Joseph has already adapted his life, his marriage, and his family based on an angelical order. Now he’s challenged to change his plans.

Settled in his ancestral hometown, with a new wife and child, Joseph is suddenly directed to get out of the country. The angel of the Lord tells Joseph to abandon his homeland and travel all the way to Egypt in order to save the life of this child.

Which is why the magi’s gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh – which seem so extravagant – now make sense. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh are extremely valuable and easily packable. In fact, they arrived in their own “to go” containers.

The magi and Joseph dropped all their plans to adapt to a new reality . . . and they went “another way.”

Are we prepared to adapt to “another way” this New Year? Or are we just content to live life according to “The Man’s Prayer?” Not familiar with “The Man’s Prayer?” It goes like this: “I am a man . . . But I can change . . . If I have to . . . I guess. Amen.” Men – say it with me: “I am a man . . . But I can change . . . If I have to . . . I guess. Amen.”

Let’s try another version: “I am a church” Come on, everyone together now: “I am a church . . . I can change . . . If I have to . . . I guess. Amen”.

Are we prepared as a church to adapt to “another way” this New Year?

- If we’re called to engage in new but uncomfortable ministries?
- If we asked to serve in some other new capacity?
- If changes are made to worship with new styles or new technology?
- If staffing changes occur?
- If we’re asked to make a sacrificial financial gift due to unexpected repairs?

These “another ways” will be unfamiliar ways and out-of-the-way ways, but they can become our way if we follow the one who is The Way, The Truth and The Life. When we live facing the future with confidence and hope; when we live in the “stream of the Spirit,” that stream will flow in directions we don’t expect and in ways we don’t want to go. But if we only ever go where we want to go, then who’s in charge of our lives?

Not the God of the universe. Not the Lord of all. Not the Spirit among us. And if it’s not God, or Jesus, or the Spirit, then I repeat: who’s really in charge of *your* life?

I think 2019 will be the BEST of times for Providence Presbyterian Church, IF we are open to following the God of “another way.” And my biggest prayer for this church for this upcoming year is that we’ll trust the God of “another way.”