

SERMON TITLE: A Change of Plans
Rev. Julie Wells Blythe, December 29, 2013

"And having been warned in a dream....." Matthew 2:12

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 63:7-9

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 2:1-25

Two and a half years ago, Dr. Lonnie Lee, Sr. Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church announced that he would be retiring. The plan was to search for a Co-pastor who would work with Lonnie for three months and then become the head of staff. That search was unsuccessful. The plan changed.

Two and a half years ago I left my position as solo pastor at Greenview United Church. I had decided to leave ministry altogether and go into counseling full time. On the day I was to start my Master's in Counseling degree, Dale Rogers had a heart attack. I helped to keep things going with the music program here and ended up staying in ministry after all. I had a change of plans.

Mary and Joseph were engaged and then she turned up pregnant. In our day and age, while it is still hard to start out life in that way, it is much more accepted than it was for them. Joseph was going to quietly dismiss Mary but there was a big change of plans!

The three wise men understood the strange star that had appeared in the sky was pointing to where the baby, who was to be the king of the Jews, was born. They travelled to Jerusalem asking about where the child was for they wanted to pay homage to him. Secretly, Herod called them to him. Herod was frightened about what this meant and like many frightened men in power, he was determined to stamp out that which he understood to be a threat – even if it was a vulnerable, newborn baby. He told the wise men to let him know when and where they found the child so he could go and worship too. After the wise men found Jesus, they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod. They changed their plans and went home by another way.

We all face times in our lives when our plans must change. Sometimes those changes are for wonderful, extraordinary reasons. A scholarship is won, a new love is found, an engagement happens, a marriage, the birth of a child, or a winning lottery ticket is purchased. (OK that one really doesn't happen very often!)

Sometimes the changes are for terrible, unforeseen reasons. There is a death in the family, an illness, a financial set back, an accident. Every day, we all live with the possibility of a change in plans that was not on our radar. How we deal with those changes is important.

When life throws us curve balls, as it does on a pretty regular basis, sometimes we hit them out of the park, giving us a run around the bases which brings us home in wonderful, unexpected ways. Other times, those curve balls hit us, knocking us to the ground. When that happens, we cannot always feel that God is there with us. We can feel overwhelmed and abandoned. Our plans change but we do not yet know what the new plan is and that can be scary. Wouldn't it be great if God talked to us in dreams the way God did with the magi, and with Joseph and Mary? But even for the wise men, the change did not all just happen because of a dream. Anne Apple – yes that's really her name – A N N E Apple, writing in Feasting on the Gospels, has this to say about the experience of the magi and Mary and Joseph and their newborn.

Following a star and Herod's secret instruction, the magi have been led to Bethlehem, the house of bread, to see Mary and the infant Jesus. When they stand face to face with the living Lord, they experience the infectious and overwhelming joy that leads to the beginning of change.

Having met the infant Christ, one dream leads the magi to turn toward change and a new pathway for life. They do not go home by the same way. Avoiding Herod and his death-dealing ways, they choose a different path. Meeting Christ leads to transformation, the freedom to be changed.

For some who meet Christ, life can shift with a subtle awakening that feels like a nudge of 'something needs to be different because of this joy.' There is a willing spirit to be changed, to be different, to be transformed. For others who meet Christ, life decisions can be given a certain clarity that feels like the surge of contrast dye in your veins before an MRI. There is an impulse that leads to change, to do and say what is just and right, to be transformed.¹ The magi trusted their dreams but they also trusted their experience. Their encounter with Jesus changed their hearts and lives. It made them brave – going against King Herod's command to return to him with news about this newborn king was not an inconsequential decision. His anger at not getting the requested information resulted in the mass murder of hundreds, perhaps thousands of babies.

Joseph and Mary trusted Joseph's dream to go to back to Egypt, ironic since Egypt was a place of oppressive bondage and of slavery and yet ironically, this was the place that would save his family.² But just as the magis' encounter with Jesus had made them brave, how much more did being the parents of Jesus make Joseph and Mary brave? Those of us who are parents understand the visceral need to protect our children. Keeping Jesus safe and alive was something that Joseph and Mary would strive to do, with or without a dream. The dream changed their plans as to how they would do it but keeping Jesus safe was their primary objective, as it is for all parents. They trusted their dreams and used them to understand how to care for their newborn, trusting their instinctual mandate to care for him.

When we face the Herods in our lives, the tough choices, the changes in our plans, whether we saw them coming or not, we too have at our disposal God's help in making those decisions. As I said earlier, most of us don't get dreams telling us what to do. But we do have God's word to us in Scripture. We have those spiritual moments – some of them are twinges and some are more forceful – which seem to be pushing or pulling us in one direction or another. And we have this family of faith. Part of our Presbyterian heritage is that we believe the spirit is better discerned in community rather than individually. That is why we have Sessions in churches and the Presbytery and the General Assembly. An example of how that works is when I decided to become a pastor, I went to Lonnie to talk about my feelings that God was calling me to this work. That alone would not have gotten me ordained. Lonnie affirmed those gifts and feelings and the next step was to go to the Session to be endorsed by this congregation. That happened and then the Presbytery had to also affirm those gifts. After the schooling involved, I still would not have been ordained without the Presbytery once again affirming my call and my readiness to do this work and a community willing to accept me.

Telling you all of this is simply to say that when you are in the midst of life-changing, plan-altering times in your lives, whether for good reasons or not, this church, this faith family is here for you. The pastors are here to listen and to pray for you. Your brothers and sisters in Christ will walk with you through those times and help you get through the changes in your plans in ways that will help you not feel so alone. I cannot promise you that it will always be easy – you all know that is simply not true. It was not easy for Mary and Joseph, it was not easy for Jesus and it

¹ Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Volume 1, Chapters 1 – 13, Cynthia A Jarvis and E Elizabeth Johnson, editors. "Matthew 2:13-15 – Pastoral Perspective," Anne H. K. Apple, p. 22.

² Ibid – reworded from Anne Apple's ideas about this.

is not easy for us. But what I can promise you is that, if you are willing to be open to the working of God in your life and the support of your church, you will be supported and loved and upheld through the difficulties in your life in unexpected and beautiful ways. May God's presence in your lives give you the grace to be open to the support and love available to you when you have a change of plans. Amen.