

BY ANOTHER WAY

Paul Pribbenow

Matthew 2: 11-12 (KJV)

From “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

—Mary Oliver

[Augsburg University Chapel, Epiphany 3, 24 January 2024]

I love the fantastical story of the Wise Ones, who travel from afar to find the Christ Child. Found only in Matthew’s gospel, the story is mysterious, cryptic, magical – and probably not true. But who cares, because it is a story – like all good fiction – that draws us to a larger truth. And I think that this larger truth is found in the two verses we heard from the story this morning: they find the child and his mother; they bow down in reverence; and then, directed by the Divine, set off by “another way.”

I am struck during this Epiphany season, this time after Christmas when we mark the ways in which the gospel is proclaimed to the entire world, what it means for all of God’s faithful people to set off “by another way” now that we too have seen the Christ Child and been changed forever.

This Epiphany season is a fitting time for us to answer poet Mary Oliver’s piercing question, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” But I want to back up a few lines in her poem to explore why the question itself is important. As she writes, “I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields...Tell me, what else should I have done?” There is the question that haunts me this

Epiphany. What else should I have done? What else shall I do now that God has entered human history in the person of a child, now that the Word has become flesh and dwelled among us, now that we have been changed forever by God's loving and gracious act? What else?

What else should I have done? What does it mean for God's faithful people to travel – at God's invitation and direction – by another way?

First, we confess – several years ago, our annual Advent Vespers services began with this powerful prayer, crafted by Keith Watkins:

"Prayer of Confession" by Keith Watkins

*God, we confess that ours is still a world in which Herod seems to rule:
The powerful are revered, the visions of the wise are ignored, the poor are afflicted, and the innocents are killed.*

*You show that salvation comes in the vulnerability of a child, yet we hunger for the "security" of walls.
You teach us that freedom comes in loving service, yet we trample on others in our efforts to be "free."
Forgive us, God, when we look to the palace instead of the stable, when we heed politicians more than prophets.*

*Renew us with the spirit of Bethlehem, that we may be better prepared for your coming.
Amen.*

Ours is a world that reveres power, that ignores wisdom, that afflicts the poor, that kills the innocents. We are people who seek salvation in walling ourselves off from each other. We are a people who seek to get ahead by climbing over the vulnerable in our midst. We long for palaces and other signs of wealth instead of the humble and ordinary ways in which God's will is done. We put our faith in human promises when prophets proclaim another way. We ignore the question that the Christ Child puts to each of us – what else should I do to live as God intends?

And then confident of God's faithful promise of forgiveness and reconciliation, we move forward by another way. Perhaps we listen to the call of prophets like African-American theologian Howard Thurman, who wrote this call to action:

"Now the Work of Christmas Begins"

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,*

*to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*

Or perhaps our way forward – what we will do with our one wild and precious life – is to see the world with new eyes this Epiphany.

- To say Yes when the world says No – did you know that research shows that it takes five affirming comments to overcome one critical word? How will you say yes to your friends and neighbors, to those you disagree with, to the strangers in our midst, to the most vulnerable in our community, so that your affirming words might lift their hearts and bodies and spirits?
- To seek abundance in a world marked by the cynicism of scarcity – do we understand that abundance is much more about how we overcome the fear and anxiety of having to share what we have than it is about having more? There is plenty to go around – thanks be to God - so how will we marshal the courage and imagination and resolve to share it wisely with all God’s creation?
- To be beacons of hope and joy in a world filled with fear and darkness – recall that wonderful line from Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem”: “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” Epiphany calls us to be the light of the world – to recognize that in all of its brokenness, all of its cracks, the world so needs the light of hope and joy that shines through us.

How about instead of New Year’s resolutions, our task as God’s faithful people this Epiphany season is to renew our baptismal promises – to explore what else shall I do, to seek another way home, to know that God in Christ Jesus has come into our midst so that all of the world might be redeemed by God’s loving grace and our faithful service. May it be so.