

Epiphany B (Jan. 7, 2023 STM: 5:15, 7:30, 9:15)

Sometimes we have to find another way. Writing about the Magi, the minister and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

We do not know who they were, where they came from, or how many of them there were. We do not know how long it took for them to get to Bethlehem or how old Jesus was by the time they got there. We are not even sure about that famous star. It is not that the facts don't matter. It is just that they don't matter as much as the stories do... (What really matters is how we respond to those stories)...

Then she goes on to imagine them this way as she tells her version of their story:

Once upon a time there were three- yes, three—very wise men who were all still sitting in their own countries minding their own business when a bright star lodged in the right eye of each one of them. It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their imaginations, but they were so wise they knew it did not matter all that much. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives. Each in his own country had tried books, tried magic, tried astrology and reflexology. One had spent his entire fortune learning how to read and write runes. Another lived on nothing but dried herbs boiled in water. The third could walk on hot coals but it did nothing for him beyond the great sense of relief he felt in the end.

They were all glad for a reason to get out of town—because that was clearly where the star was calling them, out- away from everything they knew how to manage and survive, out from under the reputations they had built for themselves, the high expectations, the disappointing returns. And so they set out, one by one, each believing that he was the only one with a star in his eye until they all ran into one another on the road to Jerusalem.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus, today we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord. After the Magi had this experience of meeting the Christ Child, perhaps some two years after his birth according to some scholars, nothing could be the same for them. And they had to find a new way—a new way home and a new way of living. We ourselves may be thinking about a new and different way of living. We are at the start of a new year. Perhaps you joined a gym or got a Peloton for Christmas. Maybe you have made some promises for this new year. A polling service revealed that just under half of Americans — 44% — have made resolutions related to their health.

But consider this: less than a third — 29% — have made resolutions regarding their faith or their relationship to God.

It seems we value physical health over spiritual health. Extra weight worries us but spiritual weight often does not. We can always exercise more and eat better. We also need to do a bit of spiritual exercise this year.

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Often, we do not know how to live as we ought as Christians. We lose our way. We radiate the light of Christ at Christmas, but soon that light dims and flickers and fades. The first reading today calls on us to “Rise up in splendor...to be radiant at what we see.” How many of us will radiate that in February the way we did in December?

Perhaps we need some help in figuring out how to take another way-how to journey differently in 2024. America Magazine has provided some suggestions. They turned to Pope Francis for inspiration. They compiled a list of resolutions for the new year from the Holy Father’s own words.

First, the pope suggests something we all need to do: give more. Volunteer. Seek to help others. Speaking of St. Joseph, the Holy Father said: “Joseph teaches us this: ‘Do not look so much at the things that the world praises, look into the corners, look in the shadows, look at the peripheries, at what the world does not want.’ St. Joseph reminds each of us to consider important what others discard.”

I would add that it is important for us to look out for the rejected in our midst. Who has the Church, our community, and we personally overlooked? Do not forget that the Holy Family was rejected in their search for safe lodging. Is there anyone in your family who has been rejected by you or other members? Is it time for reconciliation?

Secondly, resolve not to judge others. The Pope said: “It is good to ask ourselves what drives us to correct a brother or a sister, and if we are not in some way co-responsible for their mistake.” In short, make space for compassion, not criticism.

I will add that we can spend a lot of time looking to the faults of others, criticizing rather than being compassionate people. Compassion could be one great resolution for this new year.

Third, let go of grudges. With a friend. A co-worker. A spouse. A parent or sibling. “Never finish the day without making peace,” the pope said. “People say, ‘We fought. My God, I said bad words. I said awful things. But now, to finish the day, I must make peace.’ You know why? Because the cold war the next day is very dangerous.” In all of our relationships, we need to seek to be peacemakers. Bridge-builders. People who are “catholic” in the best sense — universal.

My two cents: a grudge is a terrible thing to carry around. You have total control of it and if you want to just make yourself miserable forever, keep carrying that grudge. Let it control you. Or...you can find another way. The way of releasing yourself from that burden, the burden of resentment and anger.

Fourth, stay in touch. Especially with the elderly. Marking World Grandparents Day, the pope said, “When was the last time we visited or telephoned an elderly person in order to show our closeness and to benefit from what they have to tell us?” He went on. “Let us not lose the memory preserved by the elderly, for we are children of that history, and without roots, we will wither.” Keep those roots strong. Nurture them. Love them. They make us who we are.

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My commentary: very basically, call your parents. Call your grandparents. Pick a day (or two) of the week to do it.

Fifth, pray more. Make it a habit. Even when you don't want to. "Praying is not something easy," the pope said during an audience: "And this is why we flee from it. Every time we want to pray, we are immediately reminded of many other activities, which at that moment seem more important and more urgent. This happens to me too!" The pope explained: "True progress in spiritual life comes from being able to persevere in difficult times: walk, walk, walk on.... and if you are tired, stop a bit and then start walking again." Persevere.

I will say that we could all probably try to become better pray-ers in this year. Take the time and invest the energy needed to pray well.

These are some ways that we can rise up, that we can set out on another way-a new path. An "epiphany" is defined as "a sudden manifestation or perception of the meaning of something." For the Magi, this meant that their encounter with the Christ Child was such a powerful thing that their lives were forever different. Our call in this sacred time to find a better way, another way. It is the way of walking as disciples. It is doing those things that the Pope suggests: be merciful, sacrifice, be compassionate and pray.

May this new year of grace find us truly travelling by another way. Amen.