***Fear Doesn't Stop Us* – Matthew 2:1-12**
Rev. Matt Nieman
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There's a new gym opening up this week. It's called Resolutions. It has an interesting format: the first two weeks, it'll have exercise equipment. And then it turns into a bar for the rest of the year.

I think it'll be a hit!

Every first Sunday of the year, I mention new year's resolutions and the need to be wise with our expectations of them. Because we can really set ourselves up for failure. We have big plans for change, and we're eager to get going after the holiday break. And we're almost too ambitious in what we set out to do.

So, the advice is always: go slowly, start small, set achievable goals, blah, blah, blah.

In the context of our faith, there are similar goals we like to set: read the Bible more, connect with a small group, volunteer more at the church. I would highly recommend all of these actions because it helps us better engage and grow in our faith.

Pastor and professor of liturgics Tom Long shared about an experience he had at one of his many speaking engagements.

"It was question and answer time at the worship workshop. Long had been speaking on the theme of worship all morning to a group of people gathered in a church fellowship hall in a suburban neighborhood in Indiana. Dressed in sweatshirts and jeans, they had given up a Saturday of golf and gardening to sip coffee and listen politely as he rambled through discussions of Vatican II, Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper, the pros and cons

of children's sermons, the development of the lectionary, the meanings of baptism, and other assorted topics about worship. Now, the lecturing done, he gulped down a little coffee and asked if there were any questions.

“A hand shot into the air. It belonged to a fiftyish man with plump cheeks and rimless glasses who was, judging by the way his hand waved and bobbed, eager to speak. "There's one thing about our worship service here which really gripes me," he complained. "To me it's like fingernails being scraped across a blackboard."

"What's that?" Long cautiously asked, fully expecting him to say something about gender inclusive language, newfangled hymns, politics in the pulpit, or sermons on tithing. But it was not one of these issues which caused his aggravation.

"The announcements," he declared. "I just hate it when the minister spoils the mood of worship with all those dull announcements." Heads bobbed in vigorous agreement all around the room. The announcements were out of favor in that corner of Indiana, no question about it.

Tom Long said he knew what the man meant. You're soaring above the pews on Sunday, your wings catching the strong breeze of the Spirit carrying you upward from "Joy to the World" toward the choir's lofty "For Unto Us a Child is Born," and then, thud ... the Christian Education Committee will meet in the library on Thursday at 7:30.”

The announcements do seem like “a bag of peanuts at the opera, an ungainly moment of mundanity wedging its way into an hour of inspiration.” What he tried to say to the questioner was that he understood how he felt and that, yes, the announcements were often rattled off without care or passion,

and, yes, they did sometimes seem to be somewhat uninspiring, but that, after all, the details of the church's institutional life were important, and five minutes of them couldn't hurt, and so on ....

After the meeting Tom Long realized he blew it. He didn't give the right answer. What he should have said is that, properly understood, the announcements are one of those places where the rubber of the church's theology hits the road. Indeed, it just may be that by moving seamlessly from singing "Holy, Holy, Holy" to announcing "the shepherd ministry is in need of additional volunteers," by punctuating its soaring praise with the commas of the earthy details of its common life, the church is expressing in its worship one of its most basic convictions about the character of God: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us ..." (John 1:14)."

It is in the business of the announcements on Sunday morning where we meet the Word who became flesh and dwells among us. It is in the committee meetings, the fellowship events, the visits with those who are sick and injured, the education classes, and the service projects where we meet the God who saves us.

So, when it comes to new year's resolutions to do all of these things in the church, yes, I endorse it all, including the announcements that alert us to how all this work gets done.

Yet, we set ourselves up for failure if we take too big a bite. And we're also better off if we allow in our hearts and minds the possibility that something big and positively impactful can still happen despite all the factors working against us.

Consider the magi in Matthew 2 as an example. We often think of this account as a jovial story of the three royal kings bringing the baby Jesus finely-wrapped birthday gifts. But the

reality of it was that Herod loomed large in that day. He was a puppet ruler of the Roman empire known for violent paranoia. He represented the worst of power—one who responds to threat not with humility, but tyranny.

Enter the magi. They are foreign, Gentile, astrologers—marginal figures in Jewish life, yet the first to recognize Christ's birth. By kneeling before Jesus, they make a bold, courageous, and embodied declaration: their loyalty lies not with empire, but with the vulnerable child who reveals another way of power.

Fear permeates this story, yet the Magi do not turn back. They become witnesses to God's new order—not by heritage or status, but through their bold, determined seeking.

As we contemplate what new to do in the new year, we can take solace that God is able to do new things through us despite the threats and fears and long odds around us.

Fear need not stop us from using our gifts so that the Word Made Flesh can break into the world in ways so that others might experience it.

On Wednesday of this week, I was driving back from Iowa after seeing my mom for a few days. And by the way, if you ever have a chance to go to that blessed mother land, consider going in the springtime, or as we like to call spring up there, "July."

So, I'm driving back—day-long trip. And I'm listening to a variety of things. And at one point, I turned on one of the college football bowl games that were being played. And you know how these bowl games are sponsored by a whole host of companies: There's the All State Sugar Bowl, the Good Year Cotton Bowl, the Tony the Tiger Sun Bowl.

So, I'm listening to this game, and the announcer on the radio said, "You're listening to the Jesus Citrus Bowl." The Jesus

Citrus Bowl! I couldn't believe it. And part of me is like, "Really, Jesus? It's come to this. You're sponsoring a football bowl game now? How much money did that cost? And who's paying for it?" Ok, well, whatever it takes to break into the stream of America's consciousness: Putting your name on one of America's sacred bowl games.

And I keep listening and the announcer a little bit later announces the bowl's name again. And it was then that my finely tuned ears heard its actual name. The announcer said, "You're listening to the Cheese-Its Citrus Bowl."

I was partly relieved and partly disappointed.

I don't know what that story really has to do with anything, except this: I initially thought that the Jesus Citrus Bowl was possible, that someone had decided to do something new to get the name of the Word Made Flesh into the conscience of the culture. Despite the ridicule, the rolled eyes, the negative fallout, that somebody had decided to be so bold. For a brief moment, I at least held out hope of the possibility.

On a much less-grander scale, amid the fear that still exists, we can do something to usher in what God is doing in the world in 2026.

The magi would not be deterred—despite Herod's threats. There are still Herods today, of course. We don't have to be deterred either.