

“More Life!”

Matthew 2: 1-23

Happy New Year!

I am so glad to see you this New Year’s Day. Happy New Year! There is a thing that I normally do when a new year comes. That is change my wall calendar. During the week, I changed the wall calendar in my office. As I removed the old calendar, I turned each calendar page backward from December to January. The calendar had only 12 pages but each page was more than just a page. Each page of the calendar reminded me of things that happened and the memories relating to those events throughout 2022. As I turned the pages, I felt how God had given me three hundred sixty-five precious gifts last year. Sometimes, I fully enjoyed these gifts. Sometimes, I didn’t. But I am glad that God has granted us another year, another three hundred sixty-five gifts ahead this year. I pray that we can fully enjoy this gift so that we may not regret it when we change the wall calendar a year from now to 2024. It has been said, “Don’t just exist but live!” I pray that you live your life to the fullest in 2023! The only way to live life to the fullest is to live each day to the fullest. And the best way to live each day to the fullest is to accept the unpredictability of life and trust God.

Life is full of ups and downs!

We hope everything goes well in the New Year, but at the same time, we are wise enough to know that life doesn’t always go as planned. Good news can turn into bad news and a crisis can be a blessing in disguise. That’s what happened to Joseph and Mary.

In today’s reading, we hear the familiar story of the magi visiting Jesus. Do you know how many magi visited Jesus? The answer is “we don’t know.” The Bible only indicates the three gifts they offered but does not mention about how many magi were actually there. What we know about the magi is that they were not Israelites. They came from different cultures and believed in different religions. But they saw a star and followed it to look for a newborn king and pay homage to him. To make a long story short, they eventually discovered Jesus and offered three gifts to him. For Mary and Joseph, the visitation of the magi and their gifts must have been good news bringing them comfort and delight after the difficult time of traveling and giving birth to a child in a barn. Mary and Joseph might have felt God’s affirmation of how special and precious their child was, but that joyful moment soon turned into an unexpected nightmare.

The Magi didn’t know exactly where Jesus was to be found as they followed the star, which was not a reliable GPS. For some reason, they stopped in Jerusalem and asked around. “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth.” Their accents and clumsy command of the language might have drawn people’s attention to them as outsiders. Of course, the word of their inquiry about kings and succession soon got to Herod. What was Herod’s reaction? He was terrified.

According to historians, Herod was a very cruel and insecure person. He even killed his own sons when he felt they were threats to his throne. His insecurity stemmed from his illegitimacy. Herod was a puppet king installed by the Romans. He also wasn’t Jewish. To real Jews, Herod came from a family of heathens, so the Jews never accepted Herod as a real ruler. And, now he had just heard that a new King of the Jews had just been born. We can easily imagine how Herod might have felt. He felt that his throne seemed suddenly insecure so to get rid of this potentially dangerous political threat, Herod plotted to kill Jesus. “Pretending to be as devout as magi, he said, “Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once in your worship.” While the magi brought wonderful gifts for Jesus, they also unintentionally brought a threat to Jesus.

Life is full of ups and downs and we cannot control it. Being Christians doesn’t necessarily mean we are exempt from all of life’s tragedies and suffering. There are good people as well as bad people. Because of the unpredictability and volatility of life, life seems risky and some people try to avoid risks at all costs and stay in their comfort zones. As we spend most of our time in our comfort zones, we care less about others who reside outside our circles. We become numb to the suffering of others. This is the first form of apathy. Some say apathy is the opposite of Life that derives from fear. But there is another form of apathy, which is more violent and even deadly.

When Herod realized that he was tricked by wise men, he flew into a rage and commanded the killing of every little boy two years old and under who lived in Bethlehem and its surrounding hills. Dr. McFee said, “To enact a genocide is the ultimate in apathy toward a people’s humanity and dignity. Indeed, to regard a people as less than human is what is required for genocide or oppression in any form.” While we don’t see this kind of genocide in the United States, we can easily see how this kind of apathy manifests in our society.

You have heard on the news about three buses from Texas dropping off migrants near the Vice President’s home on frigid Christmas Eve. There were families with children, and many didn’t have winter coats. But they dumped them outside on a freezing cold day. Sadly, this is not the only such incident. About 50 immigrants were dumped in Martha’s Vineyard in September. I know we may have different opinions about immigration policy but I am not talking about that. I am talking about how immigrants are treated. There are much better ways to protest the government’s policies. But some politicians and people merely use immigrants as a tool to demonstrate their political opposition. They don’t see them as fully human and their apathy toward their humanity and dignity is the opposite of life and can even kill people. To live life to the fullest, we must say “no” to all forms of apathy.

Choose to protect life!

Instead of apathy, we need to choose to protect life. When the danger from Herod approached, an angel showed up in Joseph’s dream and instructed him, “Get up. Take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. Stay until further notice. Herod is on the hunt for this child, and wants to kill him.” The message is clear—it is time to act. “Get up” is a word Joseph needs to hear in order to protect his family. There is no question, he recognizes the call of God and he does what is necessary.

What must we do to protect life and the most at-risk people who are being threatened and oppressed? We have to be awake—to shake off apathy, to awaken from our sleep, to “get up” and act. When immigrants were dumped in Martha’s Vineyard, local organizations and residents across Martha’s Vineyard scrambled to care for them, and provide for their immediate need for shelter. When migrants were dropped in Washington D.C., people did the same thing. Instead of apathy, some people chose to protect life and do what was necessary. We are called to do the same.

By obeying the angel’s message, Joseph took the child and his mother and went to Egypt. They became refugees and lived in Egypt until Herod’s death. The Bible doesn’t really talk about their living in Egypt, but I believe that Joseph and his family were enabled to make their living by those who chose life over apathy. We don’t know who they were but I believe there were angels around them who welcomed them to a strange land, helped them to learn a new language and settle in. As they shared life with the holy family, more life came into the world.

Neale Walsh, an author, wrote: “Life begins at the end of your comfort zone.” As we face a new year, I hope you venture out of your comfort zone and meet people. Choose more life over apathy so that you may live your life to the fullest and share more life with all you meet. May the life-giving Spirit walk with you throughout this year. Amen.