

“Difficult Beginnings”  
January 3, 2021

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Matthew 2:1-12

“All beginnings are difficult.” This is what Rabbi Ishmael taught in the Talmud.

From our own experience we know the truth of those words. Birth is difficult. Beginning a relationship or a marriage is difficult. So, too, is starting school or a new job.

All beginnings are difficult.

And because endings are in some way beginnings as well, endings can also be difficult: ending a relationship, quitting a job, even dying into that new and completely unknown life.

All beginnings are difficult.

Bach’s Christmas Oratorio for this first Sunday of the New Year takes as its text the story of the difficulty caused by the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem, seeking a child who is also a king.

Poets have long characterized the journey of the Magi as arduous.

T.S. Eliot imagined one of them recalling:

“A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.”...  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it....  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

And W. H. Auden’s Wise Men tell of being

Led by the light of an unusual star,  
We hunted high and low...  
With doubts, reproaches, boredom, the unknown...  
Counting the miles,  
And the absurd mistakes.

The hard time, the folly, and the absurd mistakes bring them to Herod, perhaps the greatest mistake of the story.

Upon hearing of the birth of the child, King Herod is frightened. And not just Herod, but “all of Jerusalem with him.” This king chosen by Rome fears a new king, whom Matthew understands to be chosen by God. And if the brutal and murderous Herod is frightened, well, quite naturally,

the people of the capital city would be as well. Who knows what actions a desperate and unstable leader might take?

Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus reminds us that the world has changed only slightly since the time of Herod. As one person put it: "We live in a world in which political leaders are willing to sacrifice the lives of others on the altar of power....More than anything, this story calls upon us to consider the moral cost of the perpetual battle for power in which the poor tend to have the highest casualty rate."

Throughout the Christmas story we hear the familiar refrain of angels: "Do not be afraid." We hear it, that is, until the Magi arrive in King Herod's court.

Then the angels fall silent, except to warn Joseph and Mary to run for their lives.

All beginnings are difficult.

At the start of 2021, we might be inclined to say: "Not as difficult as the year we just left behind!" And certainly, I'm not looking back with great nostalgia and longing for the year now past.

Even so, we recognize that the year just started has come in bearing its own difficulties and challenges.

Later this week Congress will certify the electoral votes for the president in what should be a routine if solemn occasion. And yet the current president tweeted early last month: "Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!" as he called for supporters to come to the nation's capital to continue his efforts to overturn the results from last November's election. In case the message didn't get across, just last Wednesday he tweeted in all caps: "JANUARY SIXTH, SEE YOU IN DC!"

All beginnings are difficult—even those that we wouldn't expect to be.

The Jewish exiles in Babylon were told that they would return to their homes in Jerusalem, but they would return with weeping. The way back would itself be arduous.

If we come through these early days and on January 20 have the peaceful transition of power that is normal for our nation we are still left with the pandemic that has been our life now since March. Grief-filled and worried, we continue to watch cases mount and the death toll rise even as we continue to wait for the vaccine distribution to ramp up. We hear of mistakes and even sabotage in the process. So much of how we live has been altered—and returning to normal, or making a new normal, is certainly going to take the rest of this year.

And even though many were not focusing on climate change in 2020, the climate did continue to change and still needs our urgent attention.

As does racial justice, which we *have* focused on, but with little change.

All beginnings are difficult.

Let us keep this in mind as we consider our common life as a congregation as well. We have come through 2020 in much better shape than many would have imagined. So now we are faced with questions about what kind of shape we want to be in when we come together once more. Will our post-pandemic congregation have the same concerns, the same interests that we had a year ago? What do we want to keep? What do we want to change? The words of Jeremiah remind us that even positive events can cause stress: “With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, says the Lord.”

There is great hope that the coming year will bring positive changes, but we need to distinguish between hope and our wishful thinking.

All beginnings are difficult.

So in these first days of 2021, perhaps we can understand the wisdom of linking Christmas and Epiphany with the coming of the New Year. No one, of course, knows when Jesus was born, neither the year nor the date. And the “New Year” comes at different times in different calendars.

Early Christians began marking the birthday of Jesus on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December because of the winter solstice. The days are beginning to get just a little longer once more. The light has triumphed over the darkness. What better time to celebrate God with us in Jesus? What better time to mark the advent of the one we call the light of the world?

And now, just a week later, we have started a new year.

Without our yearly celebration of incarnation, our yearly affirmation that God is indeed with us, we would be reluctant to go into another year any year—maybe especially this one.

Certainly each year the weight of the past gets heavier—the things done that should not have been done, the things left undone that should have been done. Each year the weight of the past gets heavier—and so we continue to follow Jesus who tells us his yoke is easy, his burden is light.

This year the present and future that also weigh heavily—setting new possibilities before us but also requiring great things from us, requiring, I think, even more than the year now past.

To lighten our burden, God calls us always into the living present. Each year, each *day* is a gift to us from our Creator.

This is the time in which we are called to live fully. Perhaps another time would have been easier. But that is not a choice we have been given.

All beginnings are difficult.

This, then, is the good news of Christmas—and of the New Year. There are challenges behind us and challenges before us. What we do may seem like folly at times and certainly feels arduous. There is danger. There is difficulty. And there is darkness.

But there is a light shining in the darkness that the darkness does not overcome.

And we should live accordingly.