Sunday, January 7, 2001
**RETURNING FROM CHRISTMAS**
Luke 3:15-17,21-22

On the Christian liturgical calendar, the season we call Christmas is officially over on January 6, the day of Epiphany, which recalls the visit of the Wise Men to the baby in Bethlehem. By now, most people have taken down their Christmas trees and put away the decorations for another year. Some of the gifts we received are almost forgotten. The children have returned to school. We've celebrated the New Year. Visiting relatives have returned home. The bills for the items we purchased are starting to arrive in the mail.

In the Christmas Bible stories, we are told that the shepherds returned to their flocks "glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard," and that the Wise Men departed to their own country by another way. Like the shepherds and the Wise Men, we are all, in a sense, returning from Christmas.

I woke up early as usual on Christmas Day morning, even though I did not get to sleep until about 2:00 a.m. It had been a glorious Christmas Eve — seven inspiring worship services, all filled with uplifting music, dedicated staff, many volunteers, and people of all ages in the worship services.

At breakfast, I read the morning paper. Nothing much in the world at large had changed. The part of the world in which Jesus was born and grew up continues to be very unsettled. Innocent people are being killed every day. A long-term peaceful solution seems far away. In other parts of the world and in our own country, problems remain.

And then, a few days later, I re-read the Christmas stories from the Bible — Luke's account and Matthew's account — and two startling facts jumped out at me. The first fact is this: as I mentioned earlier, Luke said, "The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." And I thought, that's the way to return from Christmas and enter the New Year — glorifying and praising God. For the shepherds, in the same way as for each one of us, nothing much had changed in their world as far as they could see. They went back to their same job of taking care of sheep. The ground on which they slept was as hard as ever; the weather just as disagreeable at times. The sheep could still be unruly, with one or more of them getting lost from time to time. The shepherds would have their arguments and disagreements with each other. My guess is that after a few months, they forgot most of what had happened that first Christmas Eve.

The second detail from the Christmas story that helped me return from Christmas was from Matthew's account. He tells us that the Wise Men "were overwhelmed with joy." But they returned home by a different route, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod and give him a report as he had requested. As far as we know, after a few months or a year or two, their visit to the baby in Bethlehem receded from their memory.

If you read a little further in Matthew's story, you discover that Mary, Joseph, and the baby had to flee to Egypt after Christmas as refugees because Herod was determined to kill the baby, and in a rage, he killed all the male Jewish children in the region of Bethlehem.

So, our returning from Christmas is not that much different than it has ever been. In spite of our personal problems and the world's problems, the way to return from Christmas and enter this

new year is to do what the shepherds did—"glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard"—and to be “overwhelmed with joy,” as were the Wise Men.

Here’s why. The main point of the Christmas story is that something has taken place that can never be reversed. God has come among us in a new and personal way. The love of God became a human being and lives among us. The story tells us that God continues to say to the world and to each one of us: “I love you. I’ve always loved you from the beginning of creation. I will love you forever. This love can never be overcome.”

Therefore, the second way to return from Christmas and enter this new year is with positive expectations and continued hope. That’s the theme of the story from Luke’s gospel read earlier about John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. Luke tells us the people were filled with expectation. The few who knew about the birth of the baby 30 years earlier in Bethlehem had forgotten it. Most of the people of that day hadn’t even heard of it. Now, 30 years later, they continued to be filled with expectation — they still waited for the Messiah. They hadn’t given up hope. They even wondered if John the Baptist might be the one.

John assured them that he was not the one they were looking for. He went on to promise them that the true Messiah would be much greater than he. His message was, “God never gives up on us.” Remembering that message is very important as we return from Christmas and enter the new year.

Another promise of God to remember as we return from Christmas and enter the new year is that God sees each one of us as we are. There are no secrets from God. We don’t have to put on a front. We can be ourselves. For example, as I look at each one of you this morning, in your outward appearance, you seem to be people who are at peace with yourselves and with the world outside of you. But suppose you came to this worship service as “God sees you.” Suppose you let your outer appearance reflect the inner reality of your lives. I wonder how some of you would look.

One Sunday morning, I received an unsigned note, probably written by someone wearing “Sunday-best” clothes and a “Sunday-best” smile, which said on the outside that everything was okay, yet the inner reality of that person’s life was quite different. The note said, “I believe there is some passage in the Bible about God’s promise to never give us more than we can bear. Lately, I’ve been feeling that I can’t stay strong enough through one more problem. I am always asking God for, and seem to receive, the strength to go on, but it’s so wearing.”

Perhaps you’ve felt that way. There are times when you don’t know how you can go on, or why you should even try. Maybe someone with good intentions and trying to be helpful told you that your burdens are actually blessings in disguise. If so, you are likely to agree with Churchill, who said, “It may be a blessing in disguise, but if so, it’s a very effective disguise.”

I must tell you that I do not know any passage in the Bible that even remotely suggests that God will never give you more than you can bear. And frankly, I’m relieved. If that were true, those who can bear the most would also have the most trouble in life. I find it extremely difficult to think of God as adding burdens to people’s lives until they reach the breaking point and then stopping just before that. That would be like a hard and cruel farmer who is determined to get the most out of a beast of burden.

The God that Jesus revealed is not in the business of making life more difficult for us. We can do that well enough on our own.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian, was in prison and eventually executed for his role in a plot to overthrow Hitler, he wrote to one of his friends from his prison cell and said that his ordeal convinced him that life (not God) does not give us more than we can handle this day.

Note that Bonhoeffer did not suggest that God was responsible for what happened to him. God did not send Hitler or cause Bonhoeffer to be arrested. Rather, Bonhoeffer accepted that life is a journey filled with many dangers, choices, and snares, but not more than we can handle this day.

The last two words in his affirmation are the key: “this day.” The problem with many of us is that we often try to live in more than one day at a time. We increase the burdens by borrowing from the past and the future. We borrow regrets from the past and borrow anxiety from the future, and then wonder why life seems more difficult than we can handle.

That’s why the A.A. motto, “one day at a time,” has come to mean so much to recovering alcoholics. They know that recovery is not something that can be done all at once, but rather one day, or even one hour, at a time. We cannot live all our days at once or shoulder all the burdens of those days at once, but rather one day at a time. Remember, Jesus said, “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day.”

So, as you are returning from Christmas and entering this new year, the Christmas story, along with the story of the people waiting in expectation as John the Baptist told them about the coming Messiah, gives us three basic affirmations to remember: (1) God never gives up on us. (2) God sees each one of us as we are on the inside, no matter how we might try to put on a different appearance on the outside. (3) God does not make life more difficult for us by adding burdens; we do that well enough on our own. To the contrary, God promises us through the words of Jesus, “Come unto me, all you that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

As you and I return from Christmas and enter the new year, there are also some things we need to forget. Some years ago, Judith Viorst wrote a book called Necessary Losses. She makes the point that forgetting, leaving things behind, and loss are all a part of life. Losses are universal, unavoidable, inexorable, and even necessary because we grow by losing, leaving behind, and letting go. The road to human development is paved with many things that were best left behind.

Jesus reminded those who wanted to follow him that it would be necessary to leave some things behind and to forget them. He said, for example, “No one who puts his or her hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

In telling us to forget and leave some things behind, he did not mean to imply that we are to forget all the past. The first section of this sermon is on what we need to remember as we return from Christmas. They are affirmations that give us the courage and energy to live in the present and face the future.

What then are some of the things we need to forget and leave behind as we return from Christmas and enter the new year?

First of all, forget the wrongs done to you by others. Leave behind the grudges you are holding and the hurts you have experienced. We are told in Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, "Love does not keep a record of wrongs." If you remember that someone has neglected you or let you down, forgive that person and forget the neglect.

Second, do your best to forget and leave behind the bad decisions you have made in the past, those things that are now done and gone and cannot be changed. So often I hear people say, "If only I had decided to do something another way five years ago, or five months ago, then my whole life would be different." Maybe? Maybe not? And they keep looking back and regretting over and over a decision made, and it keeps them from moving on.

Certainly, it is true that we can learn a lot from our mistakes of the past, but we do not learn from them if we keep punishing ourselves by keeping them alive in our memories. We can also use up a lot of life's energy in the process. Discover what you can learn from your mistakes. Resolve not to make the same mistakes again, and then leave them behind.

Third, learning to leave things behind means not looking back too longingly at the past, wishing to remain there. Remember the story in the Old Testament about the danger of looking back. Abraham and his family, along with Lot and his family, had been warned to leave the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because those cities were going to be destroyed for their wickedness. As they were leaving, Lot's wife turned and looked back, and the story says she was turned into a pillar of salt. The story implies that she looked back longingly on her way of life there. She didn't want to leave that part of her life behind.

I encourage you, as you return from Christmas and enter this new year, to add to this list of things you need to personally leave behind. Then you and I, as the shepherds did, can return from Christmas "glorifying and praising God for all we have seen and heard." Amen.