

“Beginning Where We Left Off”
Luke 2: 8-20
December 31, 2006

Rev. Dr. Don Dempsey
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, IL

"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told."

Beginning where we left off is important, what would have happened to the sheep and to the shepherds had they not returned? What if they had decided to have gone on to begin some new movement or decided they were done with shepherding?

What would have happened to the wise men from the east had they not “returned to their country by another way?”

There is a time to lay down one’s cares and duties and to run with excited spirits to Bethlehem and to the manger, “to see this thing that has come to pass;”

There is a time to flee from the troubles of the world and seek the safety of the mountaintop;

There is also a time to return – return to the hillside, return to the office, return to the classroom, begin again where we left off.

The church in its rhythm knows this, and this is why the seasons are planned as they are. It is a lesson we might learn well, and there is no better time to consider this than at the dawning of the New Year.

It is a hard lesson, for once persuaded in mind and heart to go even unto Bethlehem; it is very difficult to tear ourselves away.

To view the manger as somehow separate from life – rather than a part of it – creates the problem of great expectations and even greater disappointments.

It is no accident that the prisons, mental hospitals, and places of refuge know no greater season of agitation and stress than at Christmas. Somehow it promises so much and delivers so little.

Christ is born, but wars persist, the job is not any better on January 2nd than it was the week before Christmas.

Joy, peace, and goodwill – are supposed to be the guaranteed minimums for the season and when we are denied them – things seem worse than before. Depression sets in.

Is the world any different out there because we employ all the symbols to suggest that it is?

Is the newness, the novelty that we seek going to make it any better than it was?

The expectation of the New Year is that somehow circumstances will change in a new and happier way, and that with them we too shall be brought along. In the bleak midwinter, though, how can this be?

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

The circumstances are all against us. The headlines all read the same; the earth is cold and barren, “water like a stone.” What good can come out of this?

The ancient Roman calendar had only ten months and the New Year started March 1st

In the Easter style calendar, the New Year started on Easter Saturday. This calendar was used in France from the 11th to the 16th century.

The New Year beginning in March or April somehow makes more sense. There is in the earth the natural elements of spring, new life you can see in the fields and feel in the air.

It is much harder in January than it is in April to go back from the altar to our work feeling that something has happened to us and that we, not circumstance, are redeemed and born anew, yet that is precisely what we are called to do.

Of course the world has not changed and the duties that we have avoided or put off still wait for us with grim determination this coming Tuesday morning.

What is *transformed*, what is capable of *transformation* is of course **ourselves**; where we left off is not the same place as where we now begin; for we have come from an encounter with the world of *the possible* in the midst of *the impossible*.

We like Moses and the shepherds have seen God face-to-face; we have experienced the incarnation; We have prevailed, that is to say, we have survived and we are called to proclaim the good news.

We are called to begin where we left off and yet to make a new beginning.

It is an old choice and a new chance for us and for the world.

Christmas and creation are part of the same process of God; they have everything to do with one another, they each speak of loving purpose and renewed hopes, and

Is it not cause for joy that our gospel, the good news for which we seek, which we are called to proclaim, is a gospel of second chances? That is:

- New opportunities to claim the love of God,
- New opportunities to share and express that love in the world,
- New opportunities to discover who we are and what we can become in Christ

The routine beckons, the familiar haunts require our attention and our presence; Before too long the memory of this holy time will disappear and be packed away with the decorations of the season;

And yet by God's grace we are called to be open to his most remarkable presence among us, which is the message of the incarnation, God with us.

The world will not change until and unless we change; The spirit of Christmas cannot be borne out into the cold January air unless we are *borne out by it* and indeed *born again* by it.

We may, we must, return from whence we came, but we need not return as the same tired creatures, the same care-worn and spirit-lost individuals, for we have seen wonderful things that have come to pass, strange and mighty sights that will never let us look at the skies in quite the same manner as before.

Every baby that comes into the world, every man and woman born of woman is no longer the same old flesh but a promise and sign of Christ, and to deny them is to once again deny him "room in the inn," while to love and cherish them is receive a new Christ in each of our lives and in the life of the world.

Christ's presence has hallowed all that we are and every place that we are; and by his grace – We and the world can never be quite the same again.

Therefore we begin again; as we leave the manger, we embrace the world for both his sake and for ours.

Let us pray:

Dear God on this New Year's Eve help us to understand that the world will not change until and unless we change; the spirit of Christmas cannot be borne out into the cold January air unless we are borne out by it and indeed born again by it. Help us to begin anew – beginning where we left off – renewed and transformed as we seek new opportunities to discover who we are and what we can become in Christ. **Amen**