

Beginning where we left off is important. What, for example, would have happened to the sheep and the livelihood if the shepherds had not returned. If they had decided to go off and be the vanguard of some new movement. What would have happened to those exotic characters from the east if they had not, “returned to their country by another way.”

What would have happened to Elijah and to Israel had he stayed at the mouth of the cave in mystic splendor, licking his wounds and wondering about the strange events that befell him. There is a time to drop what you are doing and run to Bethlehem and the manger “to see this thing that has come to pass.”

There is a time to follow the eastern star and take the road not taken. There is a time to take refuge from the troubles of the world and seek safety. Yet, there is also a time to return- to the normal, the office, the scene of one’s labors to begin again where we left off.

The church, in its rhythms, knows this. That is why the seasons are planned as they are. New Year’s Day seems to be as good a day as any to consider all that.

It is a hard lesson, for once persuaded that we in mind and heart should go to Bethlehem, it is difficult to tear ourselves away. The view

of the manger is apart from rather than a part of life. The manger, the blessed birth has given rise to the problem of great expectations and greater disappointments. It is no accident that the jails, mental hospitals, and places of refuge know no greater season of agitation and stress than at Christmas.

Somehow Christmas promises so much and delivers so little. Christ is born, but wars still exist, marriages still decay, the job is no better on the 26th of December than it was on the 24th. Joy, cheer, peace, and goodwill. These are guarantees for this season, and when we are denied them, things are worse than before. Now, aren't you glad you came to church this morning?

But really, is the world any different out there because we employ all the symbols to suggest it is? Is the newness, the novelty that we seek going to make it and us better than we were?

The expectation of the New Year is that somehow circumstances will be adapted in a new and happier way, and that we too will be brought along. The world of New Years resolutions reflects that. I saw a post on Facebook this week. It said, that the person was opening a place called 'Resolutions.' It opens as a health club and a month later it turns into a bar. I'll tell you that the bleak mid-winter the notion of renewal and change tough to accomplish. Our world is cold and barren this time of year.

Meg's son Charlie's girlfriend is visiting from southern CA. She has only lived in Florida and southern CA. For Brittney, Christmas has always been in shorts with palm trees about. She has no idea how miserable New Englanders are and how we got this way. She's getting a little lesson on this visit.

This time of year, always brings to my mind a great Joni Mitchell song performed by far the best by folk legend Tom Rush. The song is Urge For Going. Here's a stanza:

I'll ply the fire with kindling and pull the blankets to my chin
I'll lock the vagrant winter out and I'll bolt my wandering in
I'd like to call back summertime and have her stay for just another
month or so

But she got the urge for going so I guess she had to go
And I get the urge for going when the meadow grass is turning
brown

And Summer empires are falling down
And winter's closing in.

It is just tough this time of year to have a sense of newness. That is, of course the genius of Easter. It occurs when all of nature can affirm it, and not in the face of overwhelming evidence that refutes new life. It is harder in January than it is in April to go back to our work convinced that we, not our circumstances are

redeemed and born anew. Yet that is precisely what we are called upon to do.

So here 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 the world. Christmas and creation are part of the same process of God. They each speak of loving purposes and renewed hopes.

One thing to remember about that first Christmas 20 centuries ago. The arrival of Christ and his ministry did not change the world. It changed a few people who changed a few more people and so forth.

The world will not change unless and until we change. The spirit of Christmas cannot be borne out into the cold January air unless we are borne out by it. We may, we must return from whence we came. But we need not return as the tired creatures, care-worn, and spirit lost.

Christ's presence has hallowed all that we are, and every place that we are. By His grace the world and we can never be quite the same again. Therefore, we begin again, that in leaving the manger we may embrace the world for its sake and for ours.

AMEN