



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Focus on Jesus' Way, Pt 1
Focused on the way of Jesus

Matthew 2:1–12

By Pastor Greg Davidson Laszakovits

Message from January 5, 2020

777 South Mount Joy Street
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania 17022
717-367-1000
www.ETOWNCOB.ORG

INTRODUCTION TO THEME

I am really excited for this theme of *Focus on Jesus' Way* as an extended moment to reflect, at the beginning of the year and decade, on who we wish to be as followers of Jesus, and how we wish to engage our world. This week we are going to take a few moments to think about what blurs our personal focus on Jesus way, and how we can bring back into focus as clearly as possible.

Next week...we are going to look at how we as a congregation focus on caring for one another, within and beyond the congregation. How do we care for one another as part of this congregation; and, how do we care for one another, our fellow humans? Weeks three and four Focus on Justice, Focused together.

NEW DECADE!

For today though, how do we focus on Jesus' way, following Jesus? One of my favorite things to do at the beginning of every year is to look back at a previous year and see what has happened and where we've been. This year, 2020, brings not only a new year, but also a new decade, so let's look back at the last decade.

2010–2020

- The first iPad came out.
- In the entertainment world, Gangnam style, What Does the Fox Say, the Harlem shake were all things for a while. Lady Gaga wore a meat dress!
- Same sex marriage became legal.
- There was a total eclipse of the sun.
- The #MeToo movement took off and brought a little more justice to the world.
- January 2019 saw the most diverse group of national lawmakers we've ever seen in our country.
- Racial inequality continued to plague our country.

2

- Nationalist movements swept Europe and the United States.
- Big data and automation made our lives easier, more efficient, and connected. We can now hail a ride, contact a friend across the world, and buy necessities right from our handheld devices. We also have less privacy, are changing the economy to the detriment of many, and are becoming addicted to these little marvels of technology.
- Hate crimes, opioid addiction, the earth's temperature, and income inequality are all up while happiness rates, privacy, and the quality of our nation's infrastructure are all down.
- On the other hand, global poverty rates are down, and overall human health is up.
- Our nation took unprecedented steps to restrict our borders and even close them to certain categories of people, and even caged immigrant children.
- Here in this congregation, while the rest of the denomination and mainline Protestantism in general, continue to steadily decline, this congregation's attendance line remained steady and our outreach and giving has blossomed in some unbelievable ways. I haven't run exact numbers, but an educated guess would put this congregation's outreach giving at about a million dollars over the last ten years! Think about that!
- We fended off efforts to strip our ordinations for our stance of openness to all.
- And we took several more steps towards updating our building in order to expand our ministries.

Whew! Clearly not all good news, and not all bad news. Whether good or bad, it begs the question: how do we stay

focused on Jesus' way no matter what is going on around us? And, in response to what is going on around us?!

Because if there's one thing we know, it's that the world is going to keep on changing....Check out some of these predictions for the next decade:

2020–2030

- We will be able to buy, or catch a ride in, a self-driving car.
- Elon Musk says he will launch a human to Mars in the next 5 years.
- This technology that is so addictive will be integrated into us in various ways. Which will of course create a different set of pros and cons. So goes life!
- My daughter Ellen tells me that since the 1300s the decade of the 20s has brought a major human health epidemic that has wiped out major percentages of the population.
- The Church of the Brethren will look radically different and surely experience some sort of fracture. Already, many congregations have left the denomination and there is a movement among more congregations, and even districts, to possibly leave the fold. Whether or not that happens hundreds of congregations will likely have no choice but to close, unable to maintain any sort of critical mass. [Already a leader and pace-setter in the denomination, this congregation will be among the largest, most gifted, and healthiest. We will have a unique opportunity to lead the Church of the Brethren.]

FOCUS BLURRED?

You know it would be easy to simply throw in the towel on the world as just too flat-out complicated. I can see the appeal for the old Brethren approach of living apart from the world. Our world certainly is filled with a lot that can blur our focus

4

on Jesus. But I think there's an even bigger threat to our walk in Jesus' Way. Hopelessness.

Hopelessness about the future, and feelings of ineptitude or incompetence in an ever-complicated world.

For the last century or so, Science Fiction writers have helped us imagine what our futures might look like—everything from the *Walking Dead* to *Doctor Who* to *Star Wars* and the Marvel Universe. If you've watched or read any science fiction of late you may have noticed that there's a lot of gloom and doom. But Science Fiction writer Cory Doctorow reflects on this, "It's easy to find fears credible and hopes unbelievable."¹

Fearing the future is an age-old exercise. But so is hope in another, better, way. For us, that way is Jesus.

MAGI—FOCUSED ON THE WAY TO JESUS

If you were wondering what all of this sci-fi talk has to do with the magi visiting Jesus, here we go...Jesus' time was not so unlike most other times in human history. People were frustrated with the problems of the present, and afraid for the future. For Jesus' people it was foreign occupation, poverty, debt and disease.

A lot of darkness—then into that darkness comes the light of the world, Jesus. Hope beyond all hope.

You know, there's a lot we don't know about these magi: there weren't necessarily three of them, we don't know if they rode camels. And contrary to popular depiction, they didn't show up at the manger, they arrived at Jesus' house some time later. Also, they weren't kings. I know, I know, "We three magi of orient are" doesn't have quite the same ring to it.

But here's what we do know: they were foreigners, of a different religious ilk. They were powerful, yet willing to come to Jesus. And there were these challenges that they had to face to make their way to Jesus. I want to point out just two, that

¹Doctorow goes on to say that as a science fiction writer: "I make no claim to predicting the future...Stories are better than predictions: predictions tell us that the future is inevitable. Stories tell us that the future is up for grabs."

I think are applicable to how we also make our way to Jesus.

The first challenge is distance. It took endurance and commitment to trudge across the desert. There are times for us when following Jesus requires endurance and commitment. Times when we need patience, have periods of doubt and darkness. Times when we're just not feeling it. It's okay, I encourage you to keep following that star.

The second challenge that threatened to derail their journey to Jesus was the external forces that were worthy of their fear? They were savvy to the manipulations of King Herod and right to be wary of him. King Herod was an insecure, violent tyrant willing to do anything to secure his power including slaughter all of the boys under two just to keep his power and control.

And as we enter a time of communion. I want to offer some food for thought.

What are the challenges on your way to Jesus this year, or decade? What are the distances you will need to cover? Where do you think you might get tired and need to ask for help, or a little extra to push through?

And what are those forces that cause you fear? How can we be appropriately cautious, yet push through, knowing that it's easy to find fears credible and hopes unbelievable. Knowing, that as people of Jesus, we are people of hope.

BENEDICTION

Next week, we are going to look at how we can sharpen our focus on Jesus into what is coming up for our congregation in the coming year and decade!

