

“Hoping for change in all the wrong places”

It is good to be back home – though I do not expect sympathy I must admit it has been quite an adjustment to the cold compared to our home of Puerto Rico over the last 4 months or so. It has been a change, a collective shock to the system of the Dow’s. But even more than the weather, as I prepared this message I realized that the weather hasn’t been the only thing that has changed over the last 4-5 months since I have preached here. So much has transpired since the end of August when we left for Puerto Rico - so much has happened in our world, in our city, right here in our faith community. So much has changed in our world:

- **U.S. Financial Markets Roiled by Turmoil (Sept. 7):** The U.S. government places Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, companies that together hold more than half of the country’s mortgages, under government conservatorship, which is akin to bankruptcy reorganization.
- **(Sept. 20):** The Bush administration seeks authority from Congress to allow the Treasury Department to buy up to \$700 billion in bad mortgage assets from private investment companies.
- **(Sept. 29):** In a stunning move that leaves the financial world in disarray, the House rejects the bailout plan, 228 to 205. Only 65 Republicans vote in favor of the bill, despite strong pleas by President Bush; 140 Democrats support the measure. The Dow Jones Industrial Average drops 778 points, its biggest point decline ever.
- **Senate Passes Bailout Plan (Oct. 1):** Two days after the House of Representatives rejected a similar deal, the Senate votes, 74 to 25, in favor of a "sweetened" plan.
- **Fighting Intensifies in Congo (Oct. 27):** After capturing the major army base of Rumangaboebel, rebel forces in the northeast part of the country who are loyal to a Tutsi general, Laurent Nkunda, advance toward Goma, the capital of North Kivu province. Angry civilians attack UN peacekeeping troops, frustrated that they were not able to thwart the rebels. About 250,000 civilians have fled their homes since a peace accord fell apart in August. **(Oct. 29):** The rebels stop outside of Goma and declare a cease-fire.
- **Somalia Rocked by Bombings (Oct. 29):** At least 28 people are killed in five suicide-bombings in northern Somalia.
- **China Announces Enormous Stimulus Package (Nov. 9):** China’s State Council says it will spend about \$586 billion, or about 7% of its GDP, over the next two years on infrastructure projects, including new airports, subways, low-income housing, and rail systems.
- **Barack Obama Is Elected President (Nov. 4):** In an election that is historic on many levels, Democratic senator Barack Obama wins the presidential election against Sen. John McCain, taking 338 electoral votes to McCain’s 161.
- **Stock Market Tumbles Again (Nov. 19):** The Dow Jones falls 5.1%, or 427.47 points, to 7,997.28. It is the first time since 2003 that it has fallen below 8,000.
- **India Says Pakistan Was Behind Terrorist Attack (Dec. 1):** Indian officials say Pakistani militants carried out the brazen attack on several landmarks in Mumbai that killed 173 people.
- **Israel Launches Airstrikes into Gaza (Dec. 28):** Days after the cease-fire between Israel and Hamas expired, Hamas begins launching rocket attacks into Israel, which retaliates with airstrikes that killed about 300 people. Israel targets Hamas bases, training camps, and missile storage facilities.
- **Bush Unveils \$17.4 Billion Rescue of Auto Industry (Dec. 19):** George W. Bush on hands the fate of carmakers to president-elect Barack Obama as he announces plans to lend General Motors and Chrysler \$17.4bn to survive the next three months.
- **Dow Plunges Amid Report That Economy Is in Recession (Dec. 1):**

- **Unemployment Rate Increases Again (Dec. 5):** The Labor Department reports that about 533,000 nonfarm jobs were lost in November, the highest number since 1974. The unemployment rate increases two-tenths of a point to 6.7%.

Change Locally in Philly:

- **A new mayor was elected** – Michael Nutter
- **Phillies won the World Series. Phillies won the world series**
- **Economy woes hit Philadelphia** as it is announced that 11 libraries across the city will close.
- **15% decrease from 2007 2008 in murders in the city – far too many. 332 vs. 392 = 15% decline. Though only a few days into 2008 and already the city has three murders.**
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Right here in our own Community of faith:

- **Economy woes hit OCMC as it is announced we were behind in our budget**
- **Ana Leaman was born**
- **New Members were baptized and welcomed into membership.**
- **We started an afterschool program and welcomed MCC EC coast into the neighborhood.**
- **OCCEA and OCMC (in the midst of this financial crisis, with their one pastors basking in the sun mind you) sell their existing building and purchase a new larger site**

For the Dow's change has come as well:

- **Freedom to say no. No longer operating out of fear**
- **My girls are speaking Spanish fluently – while Lorenzo and I are very much aware of what is being said though are speaking Spanish is still lagging.**
- **For me personally – in addition to speaking Spanish I learned to swim and enjoy being still.**
- **My wife translated for me in Puerto Rico at a Pentecostal church! Seriously however, for my wife whose home is Puerto Rico – the return has been a mix of joy and sadness as she leaves her family, her language, her culture and may I add her beaches!**

What I am seeking to name this morning the first Sunday of 2009 is that upon reflecting back on 2008 – be it the last 4 months or the whole year, one thing is clear. **Change has/ is upon us.** Some of the changes that we have experienced we have had the opportunity to participate in, other changes they have been imposed upon us. Some of the changes that have occurred or perhaps are occurring right now have been good and a blessing to you – perhaps a healthy lifestyle change, a deeper understanding of your relationship with God, Peace within your neighborhood. Surely there are those amongst us here this morning are seeking a major change, a major shift in your own finances as the challenging economy is upon us. Yet unlike the mortgage companies and the auto industry – you and I do not qualify for a federal bailout. Perhaps the change you sought or prayed for wasn't personal in nature. For others here this morning the change that you desired or sought was for your community or this church community or this city. For others the change that you sought was global in nature. I do not know, but I do know that each person under the sound of my voice this morning desires some

change in their lives, or a loved one life. But for far too many of us, be it a personal change you sought, or a corporate change or a national/global change, the change you sought in 2008 never came to pass. Come on let's be honest – can we be honest?

- We pray for peace in the Middle East yet the bombing continues, we pray for peace in our city yet violence and death continues, we pray for peace in our homes and in our hearts yet unrest continues. Where is the change right? Where is my change?

So the obvious question I set before you this morning is where will your change come in 2009? Where will our change come from in 2009? The temptation my brothers and sister is to look again once again look to Washington DC, or our own city hall, or our employer or even the pastor to satisfy our desire for change. If we are honest with ourselves far too often we look to the seemingly most powerful, to the most influential, and the most prestigious in this world for our change – Presidents, congresspersons, world leaders, city officials. We say things like *“what are they going to do for us.”*

- Far too often when we are seeking a change for the better we look for the logical, the proven, and the tangible for our desired change.
- Far too often when we are seeking a change for the better we look for the safe, the convenient/the well documented that which can be easily measured in our life time.

Yet, my brothers and sisters, I am back from Puerto Rico this morning to let you know that the change that you may seek this year may come from the most unlikely people and in the most unlikely places. I believe some of us are hoping for change in all the wrong places! What are you talking about Pastor Leonard? Matthew 2:

1After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem 2and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east^[b] and have come to worship him."

In our text this morning, like many of us, the Magi/Kings were praying/seeking/hoping/positioning themselves for a change in their world. In essence they sought change in all the right places!

While in Puerto Rico I was amazed at the intensity of the celebration being geared towards three king's day – the art work, the songs, and the planned celebration. In fact upon my friends in Puerto Rico finding that we were leaving before the end of the year they all responded – that it is too bad you will miss 3 kings day. Why? The gifts, the stranger being welcomed, but perhaps it has something to do with the fact that the Magi who were on a long journey never lost hope that change is possible. The Magi, the Three Wise Men or the Kings from the East, these men are believed to be astrologers from Ancient Persia. The Gospel of Matthew states that they came "from the east to Jerusalem" to worship the Christ, "born King of the Jews." According to Matthew, they traveled many miles and was navigated by following a star, which came to be known as the Star of Bethlehem. What is often forgotten is that these travelers would have traveled with a considerable “posse” – in other words they would have traveled in mass – for

safety. The traveling group was so large that it stirred up Jerusalem and specifically made him nervous (Caravans in Puerto Rico!). So nervous he called an emergency meeting of religious leaders to find out what the prophecy had to say about the birth of the Messiah. King Herod sought to wine and dine them, yet it is clear from the text that the travelers were not interested in hanging out with other royalty – though they were quite possibly royalty themselves. Rather their purpose was to worship the Messiah, worship THE King of Kings, to usher in the New Covenant only found in our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. Upon finding Jesus, the Magi gave him gifts, amongst which were three highly symbolic ones: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Let's back up and focus on the journeymen. They didn't know exactly how. They didn't know exactly when. They didn't even know exactly where – but they knew that a change, a much needed change in the world and specifically in their world was going to transpire. Though by our world standards they should have been “happy” – they were wealthy, they were influential, they were powerful, yet they sense there was a void, something was missing and they needed a change. Throughout scripture we find examples of people needing a change....

- Abraham and Sari would have understood the Magi dilemma...the change they sought was a child to continue the promise...they had tried it on their own with a concubine to “help” God fulfill His promise. They found out a delay is not a denial
- The disciples in Acts 2 would have understood the Magi dilemma...the change they sought was overcoming fear and trusting a comforter would come. Yet after Jesus death they were instructed to stay in the very place where there Lord had been killed “Stay in the City”. The change they sought came and it arrived in the form of the Holy Spirit

They may not have been lost, but the surely didn't exactly know where their journey would take them or where their final destination would leave them. Yet they carried with them anticipation, an expectation or what has become popular today “hope”. **They carried with them a hope for change in their lifetime – it didn't start with President Elect Obama.** Why else would they seek the “Messiah”? But this is of great importance. Where did these men of leisure and means who carried with them expensive gifts and a large caravan for more than at least 9 months SABBATICAL seek their desired change? Surely a King of greater or equal status right? Not at all they nixed Herod remember!

They sought out a child not a king. A child born in a forgotten place, to a defeated people soon to be victimized by generational cleansing! **Yet this is where the “Spirit of God”, the Spirit of Change was, in acting change in our world. I find it quite ironic that it took “strangers in a strange land” to notice that the Savior of the world, the ultimate change so to speak was upon them – not the nobility, nor the religious leaders, nor the hundreds of thousands living in the occupied state who were praying for a deliverer. Indeed their desired change had arrived but they didn't see him, didn't notice him, didn't recognize him, and didn't feel the move of the Spirit. Yet the Magi did – hundreds of miles away.**

What change were they seeking that they were willing to wait so long for? Perhaps though not of the Jewish faith, the sensed in their spirit what so many in this world and even we as people of faith often forget. The ultimate change, the ultimate hope that we must seek in 2009 comes from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The change or to put it in faith language the

“transformation” they sought in this world begin with their hearts, their life purpose. That our ultimate worship and our heart, our gifts are to be given freely and joyously to our King, our Lord, and our Savior. **That our ultimate hope, our ultimate change is in Christ and Christ alone.**

Were they disappointed? No. The Bible tells us that they rejoiced and worshipped him. Here they were in the most unlikely time, the most unlikely place, amongst the most unlikely people yet they sensed in their spirit that this was the time, this was place, so joyfully gave their time, their resources and this is important they gave their worship.

As they approached Jerusalem, Herod tried to trick them into revealing where Jesus was, so that he might be put to death. What strikes me is the fact that they tricked Herod whose plan to kill his rival heir to this throne is at hand. What a change of course? The Magi then warned in dreams that revealed Herod's deadly intentions for the child decided to return home by a different route in order to thwart him and his furious men. This prompted Herod to resort to killing all the young children in Bethlehem, an act called the Massacre of the Innocents, in an attempt to eliminate a rival heir to his throne. Jesus and his family had, however, escaped to Egypt beforehand.

People can make a change. In fact what the account of the Magi shows us is that we can also by God's grace become part of the change we are seeking. The Magi thwarted the impending peril this group of men called "Herod" is planning to undertake. I want you to know this morning at the dawn of the New Year you and I, this community still can introduce change; we still can make change; we still can manage change. We still have time. Change is power; change is powerful. Believe in the Power of Change. If the Three Kings did a change in the planned moves of Herod, we, the people belonging to God can also do the same thing. Don't just watch; be an agent of change! Not only did the Magi seek change in a rather unusual way, place, etc. they by God's grace became “actors in the drama of change” themselves.....What about us in 2009? **Are you looking for change in all the wrong places as we begin 2009? A Government bailout – lottery theology**

Perhaps the change you seek by God's grace and the leading of the Holy Spirit will come from an unlikely person right here in our fellowship, right next door to you, the so called “homeless” person you seek to ignore, perhaps our own children (Spanish lessons)

Carmela and Marcela even more than my wife have become my Spanish teachers

So I set before you this morning the question - where will your change come in 2009?

Where will our change come from in 2009? The temptation my brothers and sister is to look again once again look to Washington DC, or our own city hall, or our employer or even the pastor to satisfy our desire for change. The Magi recognized more than most that the ultimate change we desire in 2009 that will affect all areas of our lives individually, corporately, nationally, etc. Begins with positioning ourselves at the feet of Jesus, worshiping him, freely giving him of ourselves and allowing the healing, the restoring, the comforting power of the Holy Spirit to direct us collectively in being agents of change in our homes, our cities in this world!

I dare you to begin this day your change, your transformation, restoration, reconciliation....for the first time or a recommitment