

By the Light of a Star

Matthew 2:1-12

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Once again, this week, as this year was winding down, we were overwhelmed with stories on the internet, the radio, and TV about New Year's and New Year's resolutions. Some were "best of" stories – the best news stories of the year, the best movies of the year, and so on. And some were stories of how people celebrate New Year's. But, I think what I saw the most were stories about resolutions – the most common resolutions, how to keep resolutions, why people break resolutions. Reading all of this got me reflecting on how we, as Christians, think about the New Year and New Year's resolutions.

And then, in the midst of all the New Year's hype, I was reminded of this little story by Ann Voskamp. It comes from a blog post Voskamp wrote entitled "how-to-step-forward-into-the-new-year-when-you-want-a-do-over-on-the-last-year". And while it seems to be about her daughter's performance at a music festival – well, I think it's really about a whole lot more.

"Hope sits in the front row like on death row, waiting for the piano adjudicator to call her name, waiting there wringing her hands, a patch of bare skin just below her neck, pounding — pounding like one caged, frantic sparrow — *and there is no amount of wringing that can set it free.*

When her name is called, she goes to the piano bench. Her whole pounding heart fills the whole soundless space. She waits at the keys, not moving, waiting for her heart to calm, to hush. I close my eyes tight. **Mothers know how to pray for the moving of mountains.**

Hope waits but when the silence is so expansive it's awkward and her fear still hasn't shrunk small, Hope does what she has to and she reaches out her hand for the piano and finds that first note, her fingers shaking. The first few bars come from memory. Then steady, into the refrain. Then a stumble. Then a finding and high notes, trembling. *Can she remember what comes next?* And then — a faltering, off-tune and wincing. A silence.

Hope tries one note. *No. Not that one.* Quiet. Hanging. Heavy. *Then this note?* Haltingly, *maybe.* Then the next string of notes, a few more, a high chord. She finds her way again into the familiar refrain. Her body is in the music, her shoulders and arms and back all feeling the song.

She is carrying the song and the song is carrying her, slow and certain and faster and surer, and then the finish, the flourish. And she sits. At the end, the adjudicator stands and smiles at Hope and asks gently, "Do you know what you did *so perfectly right*, Hope?"

Um.... Right? Uh....no. Hope looks down at the floor, shakes her head. Her whole body is saying it: *Right? What about any of this mess was perfectly right?* The adjudicator bends a bit to find Hope's eyes, tries to pull her up with her smile. "So you forgot some notes! Fear and old habits and people pressure and your own interior playlist can do that — to all of us. But! When

the piece started to fall apart? You fell *forward*, Hope. You didn't fret about the music *behind* you — you focused on the *next bar*.”

The adjudicator looks down the row of girls and budding pianists and says it with this steady beat. “*We are all going to botch it some days*. We all sometimes get the notes wrong. But the song only goes wrong — when we keep thinking *back* to the *wrong* notes. When things start to fall apart — *fall forward*. *Fall forward* into the next bar. *Moving forward* is what makes music.”

I love this story! Partly, I love it because I've been that girl sitting at Solo and Ensemble with the judges watching and my hands shaking. I've faltered and stumbled and paused and finally recovered. I remember that awkward silence and the panic at that moment in between — the deafening quiet between the mistake and finally, as the judge says, moving forward.

But mostly I love this story because I think it's what this whole matter of making New Year's resolutions is really all about — at least what it's about when we open ourselves to God's love and immeasurable grace. We come to the end of the year, and we stand at a threshold. Some of us stand at the threshold with circumstances we would never choose — a death, a divorce, a lost job, a fire or natural disaster. Some of us have worked hard to get to this particular threshold by completing a degree program or significant project. And some of us are choosing to stand at this threshold. Something in our life's journey brings us to recognize the need or desire to do something differently.

However we come to the threshold of a new year, there is a natural pull toward looking back. We miss what we've lost, we regret the mistakes that we've made, we may even feel guilty or ashamed, or wish we'd done something differently. And some people get stuck there — they get stuck re-living the past, unable to move into the future.

But, I think for a lot of us we stand at this threshold because the Holy Spirit has brought us here and we feel a need, a longing to fall forward, to step across the threshold of the year and begin again.

Of course, here on Epiphany, we find the three kings at a threshold, too. Epiphany, which means a manifestation or revelation, is the day we remember God's revelation in the baby Jesus and, particularly, to the three wise men.

The three wise guys, as my mom used to call them, were probably Zoroastrians who studied the stars and finally follow one bright and wondrous star from their home somewhere in Persia all the way to Bethlehem. Before reaching Bethlehem, they stop in Jerusalem to inquire, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” Unfortunately, they ask the wrong guy. King Herod considers himself King of the Jews. Herod, who is easily threatened, quick-tempered and prone to violence, has a few questions of his own. He wants to know whatever they can tell him about the king he feared would usurp his throne. He sends them off with an order to return and tell him where this king is to be found, supposedly so he, too, can go and worship him. Of course, we know that what he really wants is to get rid of the threat.

The wise men found the child, Jesus, in his home and offered him precious gifts. This was no ordinary king they found but God's son. Somewhere in the streets of Bethlehem, they encountered the divine. God in the flesh, a tiny baby, vulnerable and beautiful. And like Mary and Elizabeth, Zechariah and Joseph and the shepherds, each of whom encounters God in the Christmas story, their lives are changed.

The opportunity for change comes in the form of a dream in which God warns them not to return to Herod but to go home by another road. And they are faced with a choice. They stand at the threshold. They can play it safe - go back the way they came and return to Herod with instructions on how to find the newborn king. This would probably mean they return to their homeland unscarred, but it would bring a violent end to all the new life promised in the birth of this holy child. Or they can choose a new direction – risking that Herod will catch up with them but assured that they have done their part to participate in the new thing God is doing through Jesus. Of course, the story ends telling us they took another road home.

Here, in the first days of a new year, we, too, have just encountered the divine. We have stood at the stable, gazing wondrously on the baby who is God in the flesh. Now, we each stand at a threshold. We can go back to life as it was before or we can fall forward. What is your threshold? What new thing is God calling you to in this New Year?

If you can name your threshold, if you can hear where God is calling you, can you also name your Herod? Do you know what would threaten you, what might keep you stuck in the past? Is it regret or guilt? Or fear? Or pain or grief?

Whatever it might be, Christmas reminds us that God's grace is always here among us. That we don't have to hold on to the hurts or regrets. That when we are ready to begin again, God's grace is ready for us. Christmas brings us face to face with all that Herod is not and all that God is. Our encounter with the baby Jesus gives us a vision of who God created us to be. This baby will grow into a man who lives out compassion and kindness, forgiveness and gentleness, justice and strength. Epiphany is our opportunity to leave that encounter and head into this New Year in a new direction. What will that direction be for you?

As you step into this new year, I invite you to spend the next week considering the threshold where you find yourself and where God might be calling you in 2026. Take some time, your fingers paused over the keys, and then, like Hope, fall forward. Because moving forward is what makes the music.

May it be so. Amen.