

**Kicking Off 2023  
January 1, 2023  
Matthew 2; Hebrews 13  
Rev. Laurie Crelly at East Church  
Grand Rapids MI**

***This sermon was designed as an interactive discussion during our brunch worship service. Feel free to take time to reflect or discuss your own answers with others. I would welcome any ideas or sharing of your answers also if you wish to share. ~~ Pastor Laurie***

Today is New Year's Day, the first day of 2023. I think it is great that we are together as a congregation and as friends to celebrate today and to reflect thoughtfully on our past year and the coming year as a congregation. So, today's sermon is more interactive than you are familiar with, but I hope that you participate and take time to hear one another thoughtfully. What I want us to do is to have some table talk on a few themes lifted up in the readings. Since much of your conversation will also be informative for our work to revitalize the church I would like to have one person at each table to be a scribe of key ideas that are raised. These notes will then be used by the Futuring team and the council to help inform some of our decisions and themes for the coming year.

The Futuring team are a sampling of members who have been meeting to help craft upcoming congregational discussions and foster a crafting of congregational vision moving forward. They are not deciding what that vision is, but working to help us come together as a congregation to craft it together. You will hear more about this at the annual meeting in a few weeks.

So, to start. You will find a notepad and pen at your table. Someone needs to volunteer to scribe.

First, let us take a moment to look back and share with your table members what is something that you have learned or have been spiritually challenged by this past year. It could be an understanding of God, a moral or social justice issue that has challenged

you or something you have learned about yourself. But please keep it brief so everyone can share.

I will go first – This past year I have been reading and learning more about sustainability, food justice and racism. I am currently reading a book about the intersection of these three in a book called *The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, faith and food justice* by Christopher Carter.

Go ahead and discuss, I will give you 5 minutes. When your table has heard from everyone, I ask the scribe to raise their hand.

In today's reading we hear of the Magi coming from the east:

Magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage."

Some scholars estimate that these Magi traveled for more than a year or two to find the new king. That is some serious dedication. They had a vision, a goal they sought together.

When you think about East Church and your involvement in East Church consider one thing you would support seeing East Church do that is new or something we could put more energy into. You can name an event or a focus of our ministry for the coming year.

Again, keep it brief and we will take five minutes or so.

In today's reading we read these words:

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for he himself has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper;

I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me?”

We have faced a lot of uncertainty in the last several years. Things that can cause a lot of fear, worry and anxiety. Things like mysterious infectious diseases, supply shortages, wars, inflation, a rise in dangerous ideologies, protests and so forth. Fear of economic or social disruption can sometimes make us overly dependent on money instead of God. This passage reminds us to not become dependent on money, but to lift up our faith and trust in God to provide. We even focused on the issue of fear during our Advent season looking at various people facing uncertain futures and how they put their trust in God’s will even if you are not able to understand it.

Over the years I have found naming those fears is the first step in tapping down the scary worries and re-establish faith in God. So, take a moment around the table to name a fear you struggle with and after you say it end with this phrase from our reading: “The lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.”

Finally, as we look to 2023, one area that the church is always working on is attracting and welcoming new members. In the past year we have received ten new members, which is actually quite impressive for most churches. In my work around church revitalization and church growth there are many factors at play that impact a congregation’s ability to grow. In this coming year you will hear more about these things but two of these factors are included in this final passage:

Let mutual affection continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

First is this idea of mutual affection. When a congregation is in strife, conflict or entrenched animosity towards one another visitors sense that and tend to avoid joining. I encourage you to take time for some self-reflection about any conflicts or animosity you have with others at East Church. I encourage you to pray for them and seek a way to heal that tension, past hurt or resentment you may feel.

Finally, let us not neglect showing hospitality to strangers. This can be in many forms. Taking time to care for and get to know new people is part of being a kind person and a follower of Christ. With that in mind I invite you to pick up the prayer card on the table. This is a simple prayer for all of us to say every day as we enter 2023. Take it home. Now as we close let us stand together and recite this prayer as a congregation:

Loving God, this is your church. I can't grow it by myself, so I am casting this burden on you and I ask that you grow it. If there is something you want me to do to help, then let me know it. Be sure to make it really, really clear so that I don't miss it. Amen.