When you’re preaching the first sermon of a new year, you have choices. You can turn to the secular calendar and do a general New Year’s resolutions thing and maybe find a way to fit a scripture text into it. Nothing wicked about that, but not my style, especially because I’m not much good about the resolutions myself. Besides, the world is full of self-professed self-help experts, and you don’t need your preacher joining that flock of foxes. But stay tuned—maybe I’ll find a way to sneak a couple in here for you.

If you turn to the season of the church year instead, you oddly still have choices. For instance, today is the 12th day of Christmas, yet there are no 12 drummers drumming anywhere to be found. We’re not that kind of church.

Anyway, if you think Christmas is behind you, it is—almost. Christmastide is a season, not just a day, and today is its last day. Tomorrow is what the church calls Epiphany, but since we know we aren’t getting you back out to church again tomorrow, we are celebrating Epiphany today.

But why do we even have a season linked to Epiphany? On one level, it goes back to the fact that when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, it “baptized” pagan holidays in order to allow the new Christians to continue to celebrate as they had before at those times, but with new meaning to the occasions.

For instance, there’s more than one pagan tradition related to December 25, but today let’s go with the celebration of Sol Invictus, the rebirth of the unconquered sun. On December 21, which is the winter solstice—the shortest daylight of the year—people would light torches and walk to the top of hills to ignite bonfires with hopes of reigniting the sun. After four days they could see that it was working, so they celebrated. It wasn’t a hard connection to make between the rebirth of the unconquered sun of the heavens and the birth of the eternal Son of God from heaven.
Now to Epiphany. Once you’ve got Christmas fixed—don’t tell the Eastern Orthodox churches, who still go by the Julian calendar—you then have to account for two accounts of visitors to the Bethlehem nursery in the Gospels. Luke’s version has shepherds nearby who make their way to the manger. Matthew’s version has a star rising in the East that leads the so-called magi to come to worship the newborn king. Clearly, the magi take a while to arrive—probably more than twelve days, but who’s counting (unless you are trying to work out a visitation plan to coordinate with the other guests, or a worship plan to coordinate the liturgical calendar, don’t you know)!

Then there’s one more thing. You might want to coordinate the star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright with another ancient tradition, the Jewish Festival of Lights—Hanukkah. Lest we get too far away from our Jewish roots, it would be well to link the miracle of light in the temple from Hanukkah with the miracle of the light in the sky on Epiphany.

You see what I mean about how thick all this is? But isn’t that appropriate? After all, we’re talking about the story of stories, about the mystery of history, about the meaning of existence. This isn’t small stuff. Even if Bethlehem was a little town, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

The word epiphany, which comes from the Greek, means “manifestation” or “appearance”. More precisely, it means to show up, show on or show out. And there’s a lot of “showiness” going on in this story. It’s all very revealing. The star shows up so that the wise men can show up. King Herod doesn’t show up, because he’s a showoff who isn’t good at playing a part in an ensemble cast. It’s got to be all about him. He’s a one-man show.

The main thing that shows up, though, is this: God shows up among us in the form of a baby. This appearance of God in the flesh is not a shooting star that comes and goes; it’s more the manifestation at long last of a star that has been running its course since the beginning of time and only at that very time came into view. The coming of God in the form of the Christ child is not an afterthought on God’s part, as if it were the latest of many plans that God made,
but one that worked after all else had failed. The coming of God in Christ is the culmination of God’s persistent movement toward us—heaven coming down to earth, so to speak, the forethought of God from the beginning of creation finally coming to fruition in this one man. We understand Epiphany rightly when we see it as God’s appearing, God’s showing up as the union of spirit and matter, the tipping point of the point at which all things, seen and unseen, are headed.

But what will this mean to the world today if we don’t show up ourselves as worshipers and warriors to this epiphany of God in Christ?

The wise men, whoever they were, came and worshiped Jesus as the newborn king of the Jews. We don’t know where they were when they saw the star, but let’s just say—in good Southern fashion—a long way yonder. They might have been from Persia, modern-day Iran, in which case they would have been influenced by the Zoroastrian religion, which divided all reality into the opposing spheres of light and darkness, good and evil. They might have been Nabatean Arab merchants who traveled trade routes along the Arabian Peninsula. But whoever they were, they made their way to worship Jesus. They showed up.

Do we? Do you know that the average regular church attender in America today shows up about 1.9 Sundays per month? We have as many or more church members today as we did thirty years ago, but we have far fewer in weekly attendance. You might think that you’re an exception, but I challenge you to go back over the last year and analyze it. How faithful are you in showing up to worship Jesus?

Take it a step further: when the wise men showed up, they weren’t just tourists; they were worshipers. They bowed down to worship and brought valuable gifts. It wasn’t about them; it was about Jesus. Are you a tourist or a worshiper? Tourists appear, but they hardly show up. That is to say, they leave nothing behind of themselves when they go.

I want to compliment you and thank you all for rallying in your giving at the end of 2019. We paid our bills. Can I get an Amen? I didn’t think that would happen that way, based on the way we were trending all year. But you
came through. I do want you to know, however, that all year we had to hold back on mission support and programs, leading us to underspend the budget we agreed on by about $180,000 because we were so far behind all year.

If we are wise men and women of faith who come to worship the God who has shown up among us in Jesus the Christ, we ought to be following their example week after week after week, bringing ourselves and our loved ones and our neighbors and friends, and bringing generous offerings at the same time.

So there's your first resolution: show up faithfully with your presence and your presents to worship Jesus as the Christ.

We need to show up as warriors, too. I am reluctant to use the word warrior because we associate it with violence in a military sense or with cultural crusades to get our way at the expense of others. These are forms of domination that wise men and women who worship Jesus must renounce. Notice this, though: the magi go home by another way and do not cooperate with King Herod. Herod embodied all the virtues and vices of rulers that keep their power by both their generosity and terror. He manipulated the Jews into compliance by rebuilding their Temple in Jerusalem. He was also ruthless, even with those close to him. When he ordered the death of every male child under the age of two, because of his narcissism and paranoia, that decision was said to have included his own son. This led Emperor Augustus to quip: It's better to be Herod's pig than his son. The word pig in Greek is hys, and the word for son is huios. Herod claimed to be a Jew himself, when convenient, and Jews were not permitted to kill pigs. Sons, though, well, if they are in the way... .

Matthew juxtaposes Jerusalem with Bethlehem and Herod with Jesus, the kingdom of this world with the kingdom of heaven. It's a contrast of politics—the one uses violence to rule, the other love for neighbor. The story shows how God has to come to heal our brokenness and mend the world. It's not about getting us into heaven someday; it's about getting heaven into us today.

And this truth means that we
cannot go hat in hand to Herod, bowing down to him as King of the Jews, even if he claims that for himself, when we know who the real King of the Jews is.

Showing up as warriors for the kingdom of heaven is courageous work here on earth. We cannot give ultimate allegiance to any political party. Like the magi, we have to take another route, go another way, model an alternative approach to life that treats every human being as a person of inherent worth, regardless of what any person can do for us.

Many of you are here in this church—whether you are members or not—because you believe that the people of this church are showing up for people like you. You are a woman and know you have equal worth and dignity in this church, even if you haven’t felt so in other churches or in other parts of society. The same is true of the few people of color in our pews and those who are same-sex oriented or transgender. I suspect that some of you are also here because you want to be part of a faith community that shows up for women who are being abused, shows up for children who are hungry, shows up for black males who are disproportionately incarcerated, shows up for the homeless, shows up for victims of gun violence, shows up for people of other religions who’ve been told that they are going to hell unless they believe like someone else.

If we want to see people show up to worship Jesus with us, we have to show up where people are suffering and struggling. We have to become warriors for peace. We aren’t just chaplains who comfort those in need; we are change agents of systems that create those needs. We have to show up at polling booths and policy meetings to win the battle for a world of justice and joy, without the constant fear of Herod’s whims.

Your second resolution, then, might be this: find a way to fight for right in the name of the child of Bethlehem. Be both a worshiper and a warrior this year. Adoration and activism go hand in hand.

The wise men of yore teach wise men and women today about showing up. Let our light shine this year, Wilshire, that others may see our good works and give glory to our God. Happy Epiphany, church! Amen.