

**Message**  
**January 3, 2009 – Second Sunday after Christmas Day**  
**Jeremiah 31:7-14; Matthew 2:1-12**  
**New Year's Resolutions**

Happy New Year everyone!! Blessings on you in this new decade. May this year and the decade ahead bring you joy, prosperity and peace.

I imagine by now you've made some considerable resolutions for the New Year. Resolutions are a good thing. They help us get focused and organized about how we want to manage our lives. We all know that making New Year's resolutions requires some discipline on our part. A recent study shows that of all those who make New Year's resolutions, 52% are confident of their success. However, it might be helpful to know, or not, that only 12% actually achieve their resolutions. Sometimes we set our sights too high. Or maybe our resolution needs to be narrowed to just one simple direction, like the prophet, Jeremiah tells us, to be led back to our Lord where we will come and sing aloud with gladness and be radiant over the goodness of the Lord!

***It seems the wise men choose to narrow their options in making their resolution: to worship their newborn king, Jesus Christ.***

Just as it is for us, though, the wise men have some challenges in honoring their resolution. He's probably not the royal king they anticipated; the journey is far, their only GPS is a star, and they have significant resistance from a hateful Herod. The wise men are from the East; from as far away as Persia, or nearer, Babylon where astrologers were known to dwell. Or maybe they're from the desert of Arabia where some had a reputation for wisdom and for offering gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They may have been a tribe of holy priests, wise, studied and skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science. Regardless, they study the heavens and they wait for a sign. They see the star rising and they journey. The star may well have been a triple planetary phenomenon where Jupiter, Saturn and Mars somehow combine forming an astrological sign. Now, in the time of the gospel writer, studying the stars was common place; along with the thinking that a star rises up in the sky with the birth of a new king. It seems that the resolution the wise men make is a one of great promise. With this new king, the scattered will be gathered and walk on straight paths and not stumble, their life will become like a watered garden; they shall rejoice and be merry; their mourning will turn into joy. Clearly, these wise guys want to be a part of this new kingdom. Herod, corrupted by his power and much too comfortable in his rule of treachery is threatened by this new king. So, he summons his religious leaders for their advice. Maybe speaking the truth was their New Year's resolution. They recite the words from the prophet Micah, *And you, Bethlehem,..from you will come a leader, who will shepherd my people Israel.* Herod's not interested in anyone else doing any shepherding of the people. So, he secretly plots to have this tiny king killed. Confident in their loyalty, he sends the wise men on reconnaissance. We just don't know what happens on their journey. Except, we know about our own journeys. That our faithful following leads us to great reward. Following the star the wise men reach the house of Mary. Filled with delight, they fall upon their knees, worshiping their newborn king.

The Greek word for worship is *proskuneo*. Proskuneo is used three times in this passage and ten more times in Matthew's gospel. So, usually when a word is used multiple times like this, it's the writer's way of saying, pay attention. Proskuneo is made up of the prefix *pros* which means, to be near, to come towards, to be with. The body of the word, *kuneo* stems from the verb, "to kiss." The wise men come near, fall down before the tiny Christ child with a kiss. I would suggest that in the word proskuneo, the wise men give deeper meaning to worship. The word is much more intimate than its translation, to pay homage, to bow down, to reverence and show honor. Because when we come towards and we're near and close to a kiss, we're talking loving, trusting, precious moments with loved ones dear. This is what the wise men share before our Lord; an intimacy and tenderness that is nothing short of miraculous.

The ten other times proskuneo is used in Matthew's gospel is where journeys of wonder, doubt, worry, fear, torment, and desperation, lead followers to literally fall down in front of Jesus. We come before this most precious child vulnerable, fragile, with hearts torn open wide, surrendering with grateful thanksgiving for the saving grace that is before us in this tiny newborn king, Jesus Christ. Something tells me that we're given a whole new meaning to worship.

In honoring their newborn king, the wise men, come before him, bringing offerings. Luxury gifts fit for a king. Gold, unattainable for a simple, peasant family. Frankincense, the costly, sweet perfume burned in worship; and myrrh an exotic fragrance. They bring what is most precious to them. Gifts not even remotely helpful to this simple family who would probably be most grateful for a case of Pampers and a couple hot meals from Helping Hands.

Make an offering. This is what we do when we live in grateful thanksgiving for how the Lord is born into our lives. Maybe it's that very first offering made to their new king that sets the stage for the very offerings we bring forth in our worship today. Our offerings of money, bread and wine, and the cans of food; the results of our human labors, our response to God's trust in us, and more importantly, signs of our dependence on God in us. We return to the Lord what he has so lovingly given to us. But, you'll notice every week, the offerings don't just appear. They're always brought forward. It's in this act of bringing the oblations, the offerings, that we come, offering up our very selves.

Epiphany Lutheran Church sits just at the western most end of Monument Avenue, with a lovely setting of a life size Mary and Joseph and some shepherds with their sheep, standing in awe. Driving west on Monument Avenue we're guided by a brightly lit star hoisted up over the house where the Christ child lays. In the distance, off outside of the lighted scene standing in order, are the three wise men. Legend names them Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. This year as I noticed the wise men, journeying off in the distance, two are facing in the direction of the place where Jesus lays. But, the third, maybe it's Balthasar, for weeks has stood turned away in another direction. I've wondered, what has it been about this one wise man that he was turned away. Maybe he

forgot his offering for Jesus. Maybe he didn't want to show up without the perfect gift. The wise men go and they have their gifts. But, they aren't the right gifts. They make offerings fit for a king who lives in a palace and adorns himself with precious metals, fragrant incense and sweet smelling perfumes. Not this king. This king asks that we offer our very selves; that we come before him, bow down, come near, and get face to face with him; to know his heart and receive what he so graciously bestows upon us: his very life given to us so that we can live with the greatness of his love and mercy.

This is what Jesus asks of us. The apostle reminds us, "As God's dear children, then, take him as your pattern, and follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up for us as an offering and a sweet smelling sacrifice to God." And why not? Why isn't our New Year's Resolution the promise to offer up our very selves to Jesus. After all, he has done it for us, made the perfect offering in his life, death and resurrection. The offering is him in this holy meal, this bread and this cup, in one another. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. He comes, born in us, growing in us, in this holy time of worship that equips us and fills us with his life giving spirit so that we may go out into the world as an offering to all.

So, I imagine some of us have already made our New Year's resolutions. New Year's resolutions sometimes are termed as symbolic house cleaning. In ancient England chimneys were swept with the hope that good will would float down and dwell. In Germany it's not just how the house is cleaned. But, how we live on the first day of the year, should be the example for how we want to offer up ourselves to everyone, every day. May we celebrate this gift of Christ born into our hearts every day. The wise men, they don't go back the way they came. They find a new way home. I don't know about you, but it seems to me that the best New Year's Resolution I can make is to be a generous offering: an offering to God in Christ; to sing aloud with gladness; sign praises at the Christ born in me. Happy New Year everyone!