

“Gifts for the New Year”
Mt. 2:1-12
Sunday, January 3, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

It’s the New Year. Time for that annual ritual: New Year’s resolutions.

I heard a man say he already dreads the New Year. He said, “The holidays aren’t quite over and already I’m about 90 days ahead on my calories and 90 days behind on my bills.”

This woman might agree with him. She said to her husband, “I don’t want to brag, but here it is February and I’ve kept every one of my New Year’s resolutions. I’ve kept them in a manila folder in the back of my desk.”

Some of us make resolutions like one man, named George, whom I heard about recently. He said to a friend: “There’s nothing like getting up at six in the morning, going for a run around the park, and taking a brisk shower before breakfast.”

His friend, Bob, asked, “How long have you been doing this?”

George said, “I start tomorrow.”

There’s a scholar who says he “heard about one poor fellow who decided to make only resolutions this year he could keep. He resolved to gain weight, to stop exercising, to read less and watch more TV, to procrastinate more, to quit giving money and time to charity, to not date any member of the cast of Baywatch, and to never make New Year’s resolutions again.

“Maybe he’s onto something. Why torture ourselves when we never keep those resolutions more than a week anyway?”

“What we need, of course, is not another resolution, but a revolution. We need a turning point in our lives. Like the wise men of old we need to catch a glimpse of a guiding light, and

we need to follow that light to New Life in Christ.” (King Duncan)

The kings bring gifts of great worth to the infant king. It is estimate that, in today’s equivalents, Gold went for about \$600 /lb. Frankincense went for \$500/lb. And myrrh for a whopping \$4,000/lb.

What spiritual gifts do the kings offer that might carry us through the coming year?

I. The Gift of Identity.

One such gift might be the gift of identity. Not only do the kings correctly identify Jesus as the promised Messiah. They also point the way to our only true identity, which is in Christ.

Rabbi Marc Gafni recalls one of the first bar mitzvahs he ever performed. It was for a boy named Louis. Louis was awkward and sad. His insensitive parents did little to encourage his self-esteem. They implied that he was too dumb to learn the traditional Hebrew passages a boy recites for his bar mitzvah.

Rabbi Gafni was determined to bring out the best in Louis. He spent extra time teaching him the songs and prayers. He discovered that Louis was smart, and had a fantastic singing voice. On the day of his bar mitzvah, Louis performed beautifully. At the end of the ceremony, Rabbi Gafni stood and spoke directly to Louis. He said, “Louis, this morning you met your real self. This is who you are. You are good, graceful, talented, and smart. Whatever people told you yesterday, and Louis, whatever happens tomorrow, promise me one thing. Remember...this is you. Remember, and don’t ever lose it.”

A few years later, Louis wrote to Rabbi Gafni. The boy whose parents predicted that he was too dumb to perform a traditional bar mitzvah was studying for his medical degree at an Ivy League university. He was also engaged to be married. Louis ended his letter by saying, “...I kept my promise – I always remembered my bar mitzvah morning when you said that this is who

I am. For this, I thank you.”

Like Louis in Rabbi Gafni’s story, our identity is not defined by what others see in us. For Christians, our identity is in Christ. In 2016, one gift we can carry with us is to learn to see ourselves through Jesus’ eyes. “Good, graceful, talented and smart.” Gifted with whatever we need to further Christ’s kingdom. This is how He sees us. This is our true identity.

II. The Gift of Change.

Another spiritual gift we might receive from the three kings is the gift of change. The kings learned to heed God’s signs and portents – the light of a star; the warning of a dream. We may have one direction we are going in life; God may have something else in mind for us in 2016. Change is a part of life. Learning to accept change is a part of the spiritual life.

John R. Brokhoff relates a story about former president Jimmy Carter and the concept of change in the Christian life. The changes God requires may seem small to us; but God uses the smallest of changes in us to make sweeping changes in His kingdom as a whole. Brokhoff writes that,

“When a person comes to worship Christ, he experiences, or should experience, a change in life. Former president Jimmy Carter tells of a change he made in his life that enhanced his marriage:

“ ‘Perhaps because of my Navy training,’ [writes Carter], ‘punctuality has been almost an obsession. Rosalynn has always been adequately punctual, except by my standards. A deviation of five minutes or less in our departure time would cause a bitter exchange.

“ ‘One morning I realized it was Rosalynn’s birthday and I hadn’t brought her a present. What could I do that would be special for her? I hurriedly wrote a note: ‘Happy birthday! As proof of my love, I will never make an unpleasant comment about tardiness.’ I signed it and

delivered it in an envelope, with a kiss.

“ ‘More than four years later, I still keep my promise. It has turned out to be one of the nicest birthday presents for Rosalynn – and for me.’ ” (quoted in Reader’s Digest, July 1989, p. 183).

In 2016, rather than beat ourselves up with long lists of resolutions that we are not likely to keep, maybe we could turn to God. Ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Be ready to change, on a dime if necessary, as God leads us. Ask for God’s power, in the moment, to help us if we are trying to make a healthy change in our lifestyle. Allow our “worship of Christ” to bring an experience of “change in life,” as Brokhoff suggests.

III. The Gift of Healing or Salvation.

Which brings us to the third spiritual gift from the kings. Most of all, the gifts of the three kings symbolize healing. Jesus comes to heal the sick – individuals who are sick, a sick human race, a sick world. He comes to conquer sin and death.

It may be helpful to remember that Jesus equates “healing” with “salvation.” Jesus uses these two words interchangeably. He comes to save. He comes to bring both spiritual and physical healing to all people and to all of creation.

Hear this interesting thought on witnessing, from a Christian scholar. I think it applies to all aspects of the church’s work in reaching a hurting world:

“While I believe that the gospel is always a proclamation about God’s actions, effective witnessing involves a lot of listening. For a proclamation to be ‘good news’ for someone, it has to address their needs, their questions, their concerns. I’ve often quoted this statement from a course on witnessing: ‘You don’t throw a drowning person a sandwich, no matter how good the sandwich might be.’ ” (Brian Stoffregen).

In 2016 we will continue to seek after our own healing and salvation. As the church, we will continue to offer healing and salvation to the community, our mission field. We want to hear and understand the needs of the people in our church family and in our community. We want to take care not to throw sandwiches at drowning people.

Jesus brings healing and salvation. The gifts of the three kings symbolize this great gift from God. In the New Year, may our church, the First United Methodist Church of San Gabriel, be a gift of healing and salvation to its members and to the mission field of our local community.

Closing.

As we go to the Lord's Table together for the first time in this New Year, I want to take you through a brief spiritual exercise. This is a traditional form of the prayerful reading of scripture. Just rest, for a moment, in this directed meditation on **Psalm 46:10**:

“Please join me, wherever you are. Find a dignified, comfortable position...Simply rest and *be*. When thoughts flit in your mind or sensations move in you body, do not be concerned. Simply notice, and let go...”

[You may close your eyes, if you like, or keep them open. Slowly repeat each phrase after me. Between phrases, breathe slowly and deeply, in and out...]

PSALM 46:10a

Be still and know that I am God.

...

Be still and know that I am.

...

Be still and know.

...

Be still.

...

Be.

(Spiritual Directors International, from a newsletter, late 2010 to early 2011).

[After an appropriate pause, invite the congregation to slowly open their eyes, if they are closed, and to come back to the present time and place.]

This exercise is printed in your worship bulletin; I invite you to use this style of scripture meditation on your own, if it seems meaningful to you. When doing this meditation alone, you can pause as long as you want between each line. When your time is complete – it could be seconds, minutes, or hours – you take a deep breath and offer a silent thank you for your being...your breath...your life...

Let's take a deep breath together, as we offer silent thanks to God.

[Allow time for the congregation to Breathe in...Breathe out...]

Thank you, God, for our being...for our breath...for our lives. May we use the gifts you have given us to be a gift to others in 2016.

Amen.