According to the U.S. government, the most popular New Year's resolutions are as follows: lose weight, volunteer to help others, stop smoking, get a better education, get a better job, save money, get fit, eat healthy food, manage stress, manage debt, take a trip, reduce, reuse and recycle and drink less alcohol. Lofty goals all; I wouldn't be surprised to find most of those goals shared among those of us here. There is something optimistic about the beginning of a new year that inspires us to make changes in our lives, to set goals that have to do with bettering ourselves in some tangible ways. And there is something about human nature that causes us many of us to break those resolutions even before the ink is dry on our self-improvement lists. Don't feel so bad if this has already happened to you, even those of you who aren't admitting to anything. A California psychologist says that by January 20, 80 percent of those who made New Year's resolutions have already failed to keep them. In fact, that psychologist recommends celebrating January 20 as “Reality Day” and using that day to forgive ourselves for our failings. Not bad advice, though I suspect some of us might have to schedule more than one “Reality Day” before next January 1 rolls around.

We don't really know what the three star-watchers were doing before they came to visit the Christ child in Bethlehem. There is something inspiring about standing under a night sky, thinking about one's life and how one might make some improvements on it. Whatever resolutions the wise men might have made that star-lit night, their plans were put aside for a trip that would change their lives. The three were sent by King Herod to check out the news of a Messiah who had been born in Bethlehem. Even if Herod had not sent them, it would make sense that these men, who made their living by watching the stars, would be curious about checking out a bright new star in the sky. That brilliant star led them to the one who would transform whatever goals the wise men had for the year ahead and for the rest of their days.

Listen to the words of Matthew again: “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed by joy.” Though the men were in Bethlehem because they obeyed a command, their mission soon became a spiritual quest. For once the wise men found the Christ child, they saw him for who he really is – the light which had been promised to God's people for all time. And then they did what they had no choice but to do – they fell to their knees and praised God for the Savior who lay before him, in a gesture of

great respect and typically used when venerating a king. They showered the holy child with gifts, bestowing the finest the earth had to offer. Before the wise men could turn back to Jerusalem to report what they had seen to Herod, God gave the men a sign – a sort of collective dream – that warned them against returning to Herod. Herod was desperate for the news of one who had come to challenge his power, but the travelers allowed a dream to alter their course and to change their lives forever.

Following a star, dropping everything to worship the truest King of kings, giving him the finest gifts, ignoring the voice of evil in their ears to listen instead to the voice in a dream – this all adds up to the most wonderful kind of spontaneity, a truly noble abandon on the part of men known for their wisdom and common sense.

That same light which appeared in the star-lit sky so many years ago appears to us today. It reveals the same steadfast love of God which has endured despite the failed good intentions of humanity. It is the same light that will burn throughout all eternity as it leads us to the one who is the light long-promised to the world. Just as the wise men received signs of the greatness of the one they sought, we, too, are gifted with signs of God's mercy and love. Every time the Word of God is heard in private meditation or public worship, in spoken reading or in the truth of song, the light of Christ shines in our hearts. The grace of God poured out upon every new Christian is just as real as the water used in his or her baptism. Every time we receive the body and blood of our Savior, light is shined into all the dark places of our lives as we are given strength for life's journey. God's glorious light comes alive in this community of sisters and brothers knit together by a Savior's love.

Here we are, this fourth day of January, surrounded by the empty shells of broken, half-hearted resolutions of this and past years, invited to embark on a journey – a journey not of self-improvement but of noble abandon. The writer John Ruskin reminds us of the call to the wise men: “These men, for their own part, came – I beg you very earnestly again to note this – not to see, nor talk, but to do reverence. They are neither curious nor talkative, but submissive.”

The beckoning star invites us to face the manger, to kneel there to do reverence, to be submissive to the young child. It urges us to pay homage to the king who appears to the world to embody the innocence of a baby, but who in reality holds all the power of an almighty God. This star bids us to bring him our finest offerings – money and time and abilities, to be sure – but also our deepest longings.

God doesn't ask us this day for resolutions, no matter how well-meaning they may be. Instead, God invites us to enter a loving relationship with God and with one another, a relationship in which we celebrate what our Creator has done and continues to do for us, one in which we follow the light of Christ wherever it may lead us.

Our presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, writes this, “*New Year’s resolutions are symptoms of our underlying dis-ease. We sense that our lives are not entirely the way they should be. We have an obscured image of the beauty and wholeness of God’s good creation. There is a gap between who we are and who we have been created to be. So we try to fill that gap ourselves. We are going to eat right, work out, fix our relationships, floss regularly, lose weight, corral our calendars, clean the garage, learn another*

*language, etc., etc., etc. These are all worthy goals and might actually be beneficial, but they can’t fill the gap. Maybe we can sustain this aggressive schedule for self-improvement past January, but probably not. Discouraged and dispirited we make it to the beginning of Lent only to do the spiritual version of New Year’s resolutions.*

*So make New Year’s resolutions if you want, but understand that in baptism God has given us a new life, a new year, a new day. Freed from all of the emotional and spiritual energy that had been invested in the impossible task of freeing ourselves we are now free to love God and serve the neighbor.”*

Like the wise men, we kneel in the presence of God's answer to all our searching and wandering in the wilderness. We are bathed in the light of new birth and new life and joined to the holy one forever.

Happy New Year!

Amen.

*Epiphany 2014*

*January 4, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 2:1-12*