

January 1 2017

## **Scripture Lesson**

*Psalm 8*

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-13*

*Matthew 25:31-46*

## **Sermon**      *A Clean Slate*

Here it is January 1<sup>st</sup> of a new year, where did 2016 go? We can reflect back on the year just past, was it a good one, did it have its challenges? Then we can look forward to the New Year, so far it is a clean slate. We can hope that it will be even a better year. We can set goals, plan trips for the months ahead. Of course, there are always those resolutions that people make. I wonder how many people actually go through with the resolutions that sound so good at the first of the New Year.

I mentioned to George that today's message would be in part about resolutions and he thought I could talk about the resolutions that Joseph may have made for the New Year. My first question was did people even make resolutions back then? I googled it and sure enough people were making resolutions back in Joseph's day. We will get back to Joseph.

Let's learn a little about resolutions. The ancient Babylonians are said to have been the first people to make New Year's resolutions, some 4000 years ago. They were also the first to hold recorded celebrations in honor of the New Year which in that time started in mid-March, when the crops were planted. They held a massive 12 day religious festival known as Akitu, at which time they crowned a new king or reaffirmed their loyalty to the reigning king. They also made promises to the gods to pay their debts and return any objects they had borrowed. These promises could be considered the forerunners of our New Year's resolutions. If the Babylonians kept to their word, their pagan gods would bestow favor on them for the coming year. If not, they would fall out of the god's favor- a place no one wanted to be.

A similar practice occurred in ancient Rome, after the reform-minded emperor Julius Caesar tinkered with the calendar and established January 1 as the beginning of the New Year circa 46 B.C. Named for Janus, the two-faced god whose spirit inhabited doorways and arches, January had special significance for the Romans. Believing that Janus symbolically looked backwards into the previous year and ahead into the future, the Romans offered sacrifices to the deity and made promises of good conduct for the coming year.

For early Christians, the first day of the New Year became the traditional occasion for thinking about one's past mistakes and resolving to do and be better in the

future. In 1740, the English clergyman John Wesley, founder of Methodism, created the Covenant Renewal Service, most commonly held on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. Also known as watch night services, they included readings from Scriptures and hymn singing, and served as a spiritual alternative to the wild celebrations normally held to celebrate the coming of the New Year. Now popular within evangelical Protestant churches, watch night services held on New Year's Eve are often spent praying and making resolutions for the coming year. I have to say here that a watch night service would be a lot different than the New Year's Eve parties at the Eagles from George's and my younger days.

Despite the tradition's religious roots, New Year's resolutions today are a mostly secular practice. Instead of making promises to the gods, most people make resolutions only to themselves, and focus purely on self-improvement which may explain why such resolutions seem so hard to follow through with. According to recent research, while as many as 45% of Americans say they usually make New Year's resolutions, only 8% are successful in achieving their goals.

Are you part of the 45% that do make resolutions and are you part of the 8% that succeed in achieving the goals? I am part of the 45% but not so much of the 8%. One thing that caught my attention was the phrase that said people nowadays make the resolutions to themselves. Would we have better results if we made those resolutions and included God in the process of making and achieving those goals? It would be worth a try I would think.

Back to Joseph, do you think he made resolutions on the New Year's Eve after baby Jesus was born? He may not have even thought about any as I imagine he was busy with all that comes with having a newborn baby in the family. But if he did, I am thinking that God would have been included in those resolutions. He could have made a resolution to help him in raising this child of God so that he would raise him as his own son. Can you imagine the challenge that he faced, knowing that this child would be someone different and ultimately so important in the lives of everyone, not just he and Mary? Thank goodness he was up to the challenge.

So how about us? Should we take another look at the resolutions that we make and not be so self-absorbed with our resolutions? While I think it is good to resolve to take better care of ourselves, hence the lose weight, exercise more, eat better resolutions that are so popular, I think we need to think outside of ourselves as well. We could resolve to be kinder, more helpful, volunteer more to name a few. Now let's add God into the picture. God wants us to take good care of ourselves so that we are better able to do His work. He especially wants us to do His work; like feed the hungry, provide drink for the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, take care of the ill, and visit those in prison all of which were mentioned in verse 35 and 36 of Matthew 25. It goes on to say that those of us that do these

things will be placed at the right hand of God. We will be in his favor and be given eternal life. If we don't do those things then we won't be in his favor. I think that is a good reason to make our resolutions to include doing things for other people, make those resolutions such a part of our lives that it is second nature to us. Then we don't need a resolution at the beginning of each New Year to remind ourselves of what is important to do with our lives. There is one last thing that I would like you to remember. With God in our lives, each day could be started with a clean slate. If we stumble and forget to keep others in our thoughts and actions, do we have to wait until the next New Year to start again? No we don't. We pray to God for forgiveness and for His help and guidance to do His work. We get a do-over as many times as it takes. That is God's gift to us. Happy New Year to all of you and may this year be one of God's blessings to you and the ones you love. May it also be a better year with our help for all of those who are less fortunate. Amen.