
Less is more

What if we took our lengthy lists of changes we want to make in the new year and narrowed them down — way down? Rather than making a half dozen or more commitments that we're unlikely to keep, how about zeroing in on a single word that captures the essence of what we want to achieve or become?

North Carolina pastor Mike Ashcraft encouraged church members to each find one word that described a characteristic or vision they wanted to achieve in the year ahead. The experiment turned into a movement, with ideas and testimonials available at myoneword.org.

What would your one-word resolution be?



[image above: BELIEVE_8838, BELIEVE_8838C]

New mercies

Everyone seems to have at least one resolution that seems impossible to keep. And that can become very discouraging.

The prophet Jeremiah, who had his own reasons to feel down, wrote, "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23, NRSV).

God refuses to give up on us. When we lose hope, when we fail and fall short, his mercy never runs out. Tomorrow is full of promise and our Lord's unceasing love.

Special dates

- New Year's Day, *January 1, 2012*
- Epiphany, *January 6, 2012*
- Baptism of the Lord, *January 8, 2012*
- Martin Luther King Jr.'s Birthday Observance, *January 16, 2012*
- Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, *January 18–25, 2012*

Preparation for worship

As Joseph and Mary presented the newborn Jesus in the temple, we present ourselves to you, O God.



[Epiphany] Lord Jesus, we lay before you the gift of our hearts. Bless them to your service.



As God addressed Jesus at his baptism, he also calls us his beloved. What a blessing to live in God's love!



O God, help us recognize your voice and respond, "Your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:9, NRSV).



Jesus, show us what we must leave behind to follow you; show us what talents and tools to use in sharing your good news with others.



Sometimes we come to worship carrying heavy burdens and unclean spirits. Jesus, assure us that you are stronger than our worries and sins so we may worship you in peace.

Words of welcome

Happy New Year! The best way to enter into the gift of a new year is to worship the Author of time and eternity.



[Epiphany] We come from different places in life, literally and figuratively, following the star to meet before the manger. Together, let us worship the newborn King.



Welcome to worship and fellowship with the family of God. Greet one another in Christ's name.



We extend God's grace and peace as we welcome you to worship.



On this winter's day, enter into the warmth of Christian friendship. We are blessed by one another's presence.



Welcome to worship. It's a privilege to "give thanks to the LORD with [our] whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation" (Psalm 111:1, NRSV).

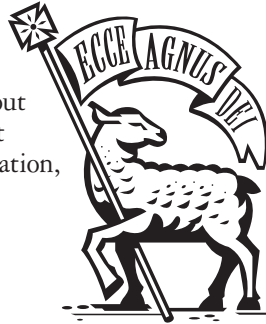
(Feel free to use these in your worship bulletins.)

- "I love all beginnings, despite their anxiousness and their uncertainty."
—Rainer Maria Rilke
- "Music is the shorthand of emotion."
—Leo Tolstoy
- "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."
—Frederick Buechner

+ Christian Symbols +

“Ecce Agnus Dei”

Latin for “Behold, the Lamb of God,” this is the phrase John the Baptist used twice to point out Jesus to others (John 1:29, 36). It marks Jesus’ Epiphany (manifestation, revelation) as the Anointed One (Christ, Messiah).



[image above: LAMB_8780, LAMB_8780C]

A New Year’s blessing

May God make your year a happy one!
Not by shielding you from all sorrow and pain,
But by strengthening you to bear it as it comes;
Not by making your path easy,
But by making you sturdy to travel any path;
Not by taking hardships from you,
But by taking fear from your heart;
Not by granting you unbroken sunshine,
But by keeping your face bright, even in the shadows;
Not by making your life always pleasant,
But by showing you when people and their causes need you most,
and by making you anxious to be there to help.
God’s love, peace, hope and joy to you for the year ahead.

—Author unknown

What not to take into the new year

- Self-help books — Trust in God first; don’t turn to him as a last resort. (See Proverbs 3:5-6.)
- Tape measure — Consider only God’s standards; don’t compare yourself to other people. (See Luke 18:9-14.)
- Rearview mirror — Don’t live in the past. You’ll miss out on what God is doing in your life now. (See Philippians 3:12-14.)
- Gavel — Instead of judging others, pray for them, help them and team with them. (See Luke 6:37-38.)
- Life vest — Don’t be overly cautious spiritually. Peter experienced Jesus in a real way because he dared to step out of the boat. (See Matthew 14:22-33.)
- Garage-door opener — We think we’re networked but often isolate ourselves from our neighbors. God intended for us to live in community with one another. (See Hebrews 10:23-25.)
- Handcuffs — Don’t offer excuses about why you can’t help out. God can do amazing things through — and despite — us. Just follow him, with no excuses. (See Mark 6:35-44.)

—Gregg McCaslin

Without fail

I was once young and now I am old, but not once have I been witness to God’s failure to supply my need when first I had given for the furtherance of his work. He has never failed in his promise, so I cannot fail in my service to him.

—William Carey

Epiphanies

The word *epiphany* means to show forth. Epiphanies, both large and small, tend to be private events — yet events with great significance for the public. Trying to share the details with another of an epiphany is fraught with complications. The words are never quite right, and even the most sympathetic listener cannot fully bridge the gap between description and what it was like being there. Most of us keep our personal experiences of the Holy to ourselves. Who would believe it? And who would really understand? The irony is that epiphanies are made for sharing, even as they are impossible to communicate fully.

—Father Thomas Rosica (zenit.org)

Waiting to blossom

A song called “The Rose” (written by Amanda McBroom and made popular by Bette Midler) encourages listeners to keep the faith, even when the source of our hope isn’t visible.

In the depths of winter, we especially need the reminder that beneath mounds of snow lie seeds already being prepared to burst forth “with the sun’s love” into springtime flowers.

When you’re in the cold depths of despair, grief, illness or other struggles, remember the deeply buried seed. Beyond your view, God’s love is already tending that seed, readying it to blossom into healing, new friendship, joy and life.

Living above the weather

Have you ever boarded an airplane in a snowstorm? The sky is gray with heavy clouds. Snow is coming down hard, with no sign of letting up. Plows clear the runway and unfamiliar machinery de-ices the wings. Passengers might consider it madness to fly in such weather.

But the pilot knows the storm is earthbound. Past the clouds is glorious sunshine. The plane can fly above the weather, if only it can get off the ground.

When troubles overtake us like a storm, we may wonder in the midst of the darkness if God still cares or if he is even there at all. But if we believe that God, like the sun, is unchanged in good weather and in bad, we can ride it out. For storms are earthbound, but we are not.

—Kari Myers

Home away from home

I spent five months as a college exchange student in Spain. The Sunday after I arrived, I walked to a nearby church, hoping worship would ease my homesickness. At first it didn't. The vast cathedral was a different denomination from my home church. No one welcomed me, and I couldn't comprehend all the Spanish.

As the priest began reading the gospel lesson, however, I recognized the account of Jesus' baptism. It struck me powerfully that, because our denominations shared the same lectionary (series of Scripture readings for worship), six hours later my pastor-father would be proclaiming this very passage at my home church. He would do so in a different language and to a different congregation, but it would be the same good news — indeed, the one gospel — proclaimed in *my* hearing.

I felt less homesick then, comforted that through Christ, the Scriptures and the church, I was connected with other Christians, even from far around the world.

—Heidi Mann

A time to ponder

New Year's Eve is like every other night; there is no pause in the march of the universe, no breathless moment of silence among created things that the passage of another 12 months may be noted; and yet no man has quite the same thoughts this evening that come with the coming of darkness on other nights.

—Hamilton Wright Mabie

?? ? Bible Quiz ? ? ?

In the book of Judges, a cycle is repeated many times: The Israelites do "what is evil in the sight of the Lord," God hands them over to an enemy nation, they cry out to the Lord and he appoints a judge, or political/military leader, for them. Under the judge's leadership, the Israelites conquer their adversary and prosper — until they start doing "what is evil in the sight of the Lord" all over again.

Who was *not* one of these judges?

- A. Deborah
- B. Ehud
- C. Esau
- D. Shamgar



Answer: C (See Judges 3–5).

[image above: SCALES_8839, SCALES_8839C]

The guide

Picture a man stumbling along in a heavy fog, completely disoriented. Then, off in the distance, he sees the light of one small lamp. Its glow is sufficient neither to burn off the fog nor to illuminate the obstacles that might be on the ground between the man and that lamp. Still, it is a steadily burning lamp. Something within the man prompts him to believe that if he heads toward it, he will be going in the right direction. That "something" we can call "faith."

While heading toward the lamp, he finds another lost man whose eyesight is so poor he can't see the lamp. The first man takes the second by the hand and helps him toward the lamp also. The act of reaching out to another we can call "love."

And the lamp that draws him? It's called "hope."

—*The Wired Word* (August 7, 2011)