

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this morning's sermon harkens back to the beginning of the Christmas gospel, to that beautiful scene when the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she shall conceive the Christ Child. I am pleased to recall this scene because it expresses something of the excitement of the Name – the Name of Jesus which we celebrate each New Year's day. The scene goes thus:

³⁰And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. ³¹And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. ³²He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest...(Luke 1:30-32, KJV)

This is the Name you bear – all ye baptized. This is the Name that “charms our fears,” which gives us hope and courage as we now go forward into this year of our Lord 2008. You are called “Christians,” and so you are. You have been united with Jesus, and you will be at your absolute best in 2008 when you are most like Him whose name you bear.

And where would we have been apart from this holy Name? Where would we be, facing this year 2008, if Christmas had not happened, if unto us a Saviour had not been born, if Jesus were not the very image of Life for us?

Why, apart from this holy Name we would have been, as it were, the Wise Men from the East setting out in pursuit of the good, only without their star to guide them. They ready their camels and gather their possessions, including their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They are restless. They burn with the

desire to hit the road in pursuit of something very good. They carry with them their fair share of hopes and dreams and fears. They also carry with them the sense, the holy intuition, that there is a newborn king of Jews, that he is great, that his kingdom will be without end, and that he is indeed the son of “the Highest.” They desire this newborn King. They desire to be in this world with him as king. They want to lay their eyes on him and give him their gifts. And in any case, time marches on, the new year stretches before them, they must *somehow* deal with the time God has granted to them, and so they set out in search of the Babe. Only, without their star, how are they going to make progress on the journey of life ahead of them? Ours is a big planet. They could wander aimlessly and never chance upon the one they seek. They need their star, they need some direction in life. They need Jesus, I tell you, and so do you and I. He is our bright and shining star. He is the trustworthy guide for us in the journey ahead of us in this year of our Lord 2008.

Again, where would we have been had Christmas not happened, if unto us a Saviour had not been born, and if his holy Name had not been entrusted to us in baptism?

Why, we would have been, as it were, the children of Israel wandering in the desert for forty years. What adventures and what tumult that generation had been through! They had moved from the despair of Egyptian slavery, to the fear and hope of gathering themselves together and fleeing Egypt, to the terror of finding their way blocked by the Red Sea, to the exhilaration of marching dry shod right through that sea, to the thrill of Moses bringing the Ten Commandments down to them from Mt. Sinai, to the daily miracle of being fed by manna from heaven. These were an experienced and divinely graced people, I say, yet, for all that, they

wandered aimlessly in the desert till nearly every adult among them had died. Why? Well, for all the benefits and miracles they had received, they still did not take the LORD to be their star. They still grumbled, murmured, and doubted whether the LORD could save them. And as their reward for doubting their Saviour, they faced their year 2008 aimlessly and fruitlessly. They endured their time, but they did not enjoy their time, for their lives were not ordered toward God, but toward their regular human ways, till, at last, they perished.

Forty years of aimless wandering. Forty years! Last night we celebrated our son Sam's twenty-first birthday. He is a New Year's Eve baby, and so, last night we enjoyed his birthday supper. Sam mentioned that someone had teased him that now he is more than half way to age forty! And Sam groaned at that thought. Age forty! But some of us have been there, now haven't we? Some of us have lived our two-score years and even more. The question is, have we been wandering aimlessly so far? Have we been that generation of Israelites in the desert?

Not for you! You need not wander aimlessly in the wilderness this year 2008, for the Name of Jesus has been entrusted to you. He is your compass, he is your North Star, he is your Good Shepherd, he is the one who will guide you safely to the Promised Land if only you will heed him.

Again, where would we have been had Christmas not happened, if unto us a Saviour had not been born, and if his holy Name had not been entrusted to us in baptism?

Why, we would have been, as it were, the Prodigal Son, giving his father and brother and farewell a hug and setting out on the road. Only, you know how it was with the Prodigal Son: he was not setting out on that road in pursuit of the beauty of holiness, but in pursuit of fun. Perhaps even impious fun. In fact, the Bible says that the Son "wasted his substance with riotous living" (Luke 15:13), and his older brother accuses him of having "devoured thy living with harlots." (Luke 15:30) Thus the Prodigal Son spent his year 2008.

But there is no need for you to spend your year that way. Indeed, if you spend this coming year with Christ, it will be a good year. There will be no wasting of your substance with riotous living, no harlots, no participation in their downfall, no guilty, guilty conscience.

You were built for this, that you should wear well the holy name of Jesus in this year of our Lord 2008. He desires your friendship this year. He desires your loyalty this year. He desires to walk with you and make this a great year for you, for He is great, indeed the Son of the Most High, and blessed are they who dwell in him in 2008.

Glory be to this One who makes the days and the ages good, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.