

“Celebrate God’s Grace”

In the ancient calendar used by the Romans, from which our calendar was influenced, the name of each month had a meaning. For example, the month of February was so named because that was the time of the year for a feast called Februa. March was named after Mars, the god of war. The months July and August were named, respectively, after Julius Caesar and his successor, Caesar Augustus. September, October, November, and December were named for the numbers seven, eight, nine, and ten in the Latin language because old Roman calendars only had 10 months not 12. One month in the ancient Roman calendar that had an especially descriptive name was January. The Latin word Janua means a door or window from which a person may look both ways, in other words, in and out--forward and back. Historians say that January is also derived from the name Janus, a common household god among the Romans. He was often depicted facing in two directions. Basically, he was looking forward and back. Tonight as we stand at the doorway to the month of January and a new year we naturally look back over the past year and look ahead to the new year. My prayer is that while we do that we keep in mind the words of Isaiah 63:7-9 so that we celebrate God’s grace as we appreciate His grace in 2018 and anticipate His grace in 2019. Our text comes from the end of Isaiah’s prophecy. Isaiah had described the changes the Messiah—the promised Savior, would bring to God’s people in the chapters before our text. Here he went on to describe the effect His preaching would have on those in Israel who were faithful to God. He introduces the final section of his prophecy by using the prayer of someone who recognizes all that the Lord has done for his people.

“I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us - yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, ‘Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me;’ and so he became their Savior. In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”

We don’t have to look very far back in 2018 to be reminded of God’s undeserved love. A week ago was Christmas Eve where we celebrated God keeping his promise to send a Savior who was born to be our substitute in life (as he never sinned) and in death (as he suffered Hell and death for our sins). That is the clearest and most complete reminder of God’s kindness and love for us. We rejoice that we have had the privilege to once again celebrate his birthday and speak about his great love for us. But obviously our spiritual blessings for 2018 weren’t confined to Christmas. For the last 365 days God has fed us with his Word at church, at school, and in our homes providing us with guidance for life and encouragement to fulfill our vocations on earth. In 2018 we had many opportunities to remember our baptisms as we drowned our old sinful self in repentance and received God’s reassurance of forgiveness for all of our sins as we received Jesus true body and blood in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. As we celebrate God’s grace tonight we look back in appreciation of a whole year of enjoying God’s Word and Sacraments.

The person praying in our text from Isaiah acknowledged that the Lord had done many good things for his people. The Lord had brought his people out of slavery in Egypt. He gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. He defeated their enemies. Through mighty miracles he had protected his people and prospered them. He blessed their crops and their other sources of income. He did all these things because

of his compassion and love. They were God's people and they enjoyed all the benefits of being God's people. This reminder of what God did for his people of old reminds us of what God does for his people today. He still does great things for us. Who of us can't tell of the kindnesses of the Lord? Take a moment to look back in appreciation for all that the Lord has done for us this past year. Who of us can't tell of the deeds for which God is to be praised? Our Lord has given us shelter, food, and clothing this past year. We have enjoyed the blessings of family and friends. We have enjoyed God's creation for another year. As we celebrate God's grace tonight we look back in appreciation of a whole year of God providing blessings beyond belief, way more than we can use.

But someone might say that not everything in 2018 was all that good. What about all the gun violence, sexual harassment, political unrest, stock market uncertainty, and natural disasters? Someone might say, "I had troubles and problems. In fact, this year was one of the worst I have ever had. I lost my job. I was sick. I faced financial problems and other troubles. 2018 was not a good year and I'm happy to see it pass." Sometimes the temptation to feel that way and have those kinds of thoughts is strong. But when Isaiah recorded this prayer he could have said something similar to that. He and other believers faced persecution. Their country was under the threat of foreign invasion. Outwardly speaking things were very bad and very uncertain. Yet, Isaiah knew that no matter how bad things looked God was with him and his people. Isaiah knew that he could only see things from a human perspective. If he could look at things from God's perspective he would know that God was concerned about him and doing everything for his eternal good. Because of God's grace, especially shown through Jesus Christ, all of us can look back at this year with appreciation. No matter what has happened the Lord has been good to us. We are reminded that even when things looked bad in 2018 - **"In all their distress he too was distressed"** (vs. 9). Through all the trials and troubles we faced in 2018 God was sympathetic. That is another reason to celebrate God's grace. Our God felt our pain and when we shed tears of sorrow our God shed tears of sorrow. **"And the angel of his presence saved them"** (vs. 9). We may never know how many times we walked through the valley of the shadow of death in 2018 and not even known it. But we do know the Lord's presence saved us from disaster. He sends his angels to protect us and he shelters us under his protecting hand. **"In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old"** (vs. 9). Through everything, both good and bad, God was there to draw us into a closer relationship with him and to teach us to rely on him more fully. God made good on this promise from Isaiah in 46:3-4, **"I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you."** As we look back on 2018 and beyond may we celebrate God's grace in appreciation for his blessings to us!

The other part of our New Year's celebration is looking ahead as we make resolutions and plans. Yet we have a great advantage over many who will celebrate New Year's eve tonight. We can look ahead to 2019 with anticipation as we go forward with God's grace. 2019 will be no different than the other years as we will fall short of God's perfect and holy will. But we also know that our Lord's mercy is new every day. No matter how badly we stumble next year our God will come to our side ready to offer his love and forgiveness. We also look ahead to 2019 with anticipation because it is another 365 days of opportunities to find hope and comfort in God's Word, to grow in our ability to live that Word, and to celebrate others coming to faith in Jesus through that Word. We look ahead to 2019 with anticipation of continuing to be the recipients of his forgiveness and his powerful Word.

Instead of looking ahead to 2019 with anticipation there are many who look ahead with fear and trepidation. What will the new year hold for my health, my employment, my finances, my relationships,

our country, our church and synod? How wonderful it is for us to be confident that no matter what happens God will be with us and care for us. He promises to provide all that we need. We may experience setbacks but the Lord will only do what is best for us. **“In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy, he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old”** (vs. 9). Anticipate God keeping this promise again in 2019.

Beginning a new year allows us a wonderful opportunity to make resolutions and plans, to set goals and to dream dreams. As we do that and anticipate it coming to fruition, let's keep in mind the word of James. **"Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that'"** (James 4:13-15).

Tonight and tomorrow as you ring in the new year, celebrate God's grace. Grace that moves us to look back with appreciation. Grace that allows us to look ahead with anticipation. Grace that allows us to say like the Christian Isaiah quoted: **"I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us - yes, the many good things he has done..., according to his compassion and many kindnesses"** (vs. 7). Amen.