

New Year's Eve | The Seventh Day of Christmas
St. Luke 13:6-9: "God's Plan for You in the New Year"
December 30/31, 2017 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Eternal God, we commit to Your mercy and forgiveness the year now ending and commend to Your blessing and love the times yet to come. In the new year, abide among us with Your Holy Spirit that we may always trust in the saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (*Pastoral Care Companion*, CPH 2007, p. 604)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. We read as follows in Jesus' name:

And [Jesus] told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' / "And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who patiently and diligently calls us to repentance and faith, dear fellow redeemed:

When making New Year's resolutions, not many will seriously resolve to do things that are bad. Almost no one says, "I am going to eat and drink too much, so I can be unhealthy." "I am going to be a lazy worker and take advantage of my employer." "I am going to hurt the people around me with my short temper and selfish behavior." "I am going to assume the worst and be easily offended." Typically, our resolutions have to do with adopting a healthier lifestyle, working harder, treating the people around us better, and having a positive outlook on life.

But for all the promise that a new year brings, our plans do not always play out like we hope. Before too long, our good intentions fail, and we often revert to the same old habits. That doesn't mean we should give up on our resolutions. Having the desire to be and do better is important even if we fail to really improve. Even if we do improve and succeed at our resolutions, this will not guarantee a happy new year for each of us. Our joy in the new year is not about carrying out our own plans, but on following God's plan for us, a plan which has two major parts.

I

The first part of His plan does not start with what you *will do*, but what you already *have done*. His plan for you starts with your repentance, the acknowledgement of your sins. Everyone

making new year's resolutions does this, but only in part. People don't make resolutions unless they recognize they have failed in some way. They resolve to lose weight because they have maintained a poor diet and insufficient exercise habits. They resolve to treat others better because they have often treated them poorly.

But backed into a corner, most will try to pin their failures on others. "I am overweight and out of shape because of my work and family responsibilities." "I would have treated my family members and co-workers better if they showed me some respect and didn't expect me to do everything for them." So even though there is recognition of failure, there is not necessarily repentance.

Repentance comes from the heart. It is a breaking down of all my excuses, all my pride, all my bravado, and stating the matter exactly as it is. I am a sinner. I am not what I should be. I have not done what I should do. I deserve to feel the holy wrath of God for eternity. Repentance is to speak as David did after his adultery, murder, and lies had been uncovered. "*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me,*" he said to God. "*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment*" (Ps. 51:3-4).

Until the LORD brought David to repentance, he had fallen from grace. He was an unbeliever – even David, whom the LORD had called "*a man after his own heart*" (1Sam. 13:14, Ac. 13:20). If the great King David could fall, who penned our most beautiful Psalms, then any of us could as well. The devil is only too happy to take our hand and help us along the path toward unbelief. Like David who was overcome with lust when he saw a woman bathing, so the devil uses pornographic images to draw men away from healthy sexual behavior and from marriage. He tempts people to abuse drink and drugs, so that they think of little else. He fills hearts and heads with stubbornness and selfishness, causing an epidemic of people who are eagle-eyed about what they can *get* from others and blind to what they should *give*.

Maybe you haven't succumbed to these addictions and bad behaviors. Maybe you are the one people think of when they hear the adjectives "kind," "faithful," and "generous." Then you need to watch out for the temptations to pride and self-reliance. You certainly should resolve to do good things and live better, but you should not imagine that you have accomplished everything God has given you to do.

If you were to measure yourself against the people around you, you might think you are doing pretty well. But God tells you to measure yourself against His holy law. His law is a mirror that shows you a true reflection of your sinful nature. Notice in Jesus' parable how the owner of the vineyard clearly saw the problem with his fig tree: three years with no fruit. The fig tree did not judge itself. If it could think, it might have regarded itself as a lovely tree, with beautiful branches and leaves. It provided a place for birds to nest and a nice spot in the shade for anyone looking for relief from the sun. What did it matter whether it had fruit or not?

This is how it goes for the person who does not measure himself against God's law. He thinks he is living a virtuous life. She thinks that God must be happy with her. But that cannot be true when there is no repentance.

II

The second part of God's plan after your repentance is for you is that you look to Him in faith. If all you had were His law, you could do nothing but hang your head in shame and wait for His judgment. But God has given you hope. He has given you His Son. God's Son arrived on earth with resolutions of His own. He resolved to perfectly keep the law of God on behalf of sinners. And He resolved to atone for all sin and crush Satan by His death on the cross. These were not empty promises. God set His mind to save sinners, and He would not let anything derail His plans.

Your God did for you exactly what He said He would. He did live a holy life in your place, and He did redeem you from your sin and death. Your status before God does not depend on your improving and getting holier day after day. His love for you will not change even when you fall into sin. While you should repent of all your sins committed in the past year, you should also believe that those sins are erased from God's ledger. They are already forgiven. The tension between your sinfulness and God's law is resolved in Jesus, who gave Himself for you.

Now you could hear what I just said and let the devil twist it like this: "Well, if Jesus forgives my sins, then I might as well just go on sinning." And why not? Whether I do well or poorly, won't Jesus love me just the same? Here's the problem with this thinking: You can't have Jesus while hating His Word. Whenever you willfully do something that the Bible says you should not do, you show what little respect you have for God. Then you are in danger of being the fruitless fig tree that the master of the vineyard orders to be cut down and destroyed.

Believers in Jesus want to live according to His Word. They want to do what pleases Him. They willingly repent of their sins knowing that God is already aware of the wrongs committed and already forgives it. They humbly commit their life, their work, and their future to God's hands trusting that He will bless them and bless others through them.

And He does. Even through us weak sinners, the Lord brings blessings to those around us. He brings love and stability to our families through our feeble efforts, He gives daily bread to others through our imperfect work, and He provides help to our neighbors even though our service is not always so willing. You may not be living the life you dreamed you would when you were younger. But God has put you where you are now to love and serve your neighbors.

Your acts of love and kindness are the fruits of faith produced in you by the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul listed such fruits in his letter to the Galatians. They are the fruits of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (5:22-23). God produces these fruits by applying and reapplying the potent fertilizer of His Word. His Word keeps your faith fed and your spiritual life growing. His law shows you where you have fallen short and what needs to change in your life. His Gospel gives you the eternal blessings won by Jesus. The Gospel is like a tree full of fruit providing exactly what your hungry soul needs—the righteousness, forgiveness, and life of your Savior. The Gospel also motivates you to share the love of Jesus with others.

This is how **God's Plan for You in the New Year** is carried out. He leads you to repentance and faith through His Word. Peter in today's Epistle lesson describes the Word of God as "*living and abiding,*" a Word that "*remains forever*" (1Pe. 1:23,25). You were planted in God's kingdom

through the imperishable seed of this Word, and it is through this living Word that God keeps your faith alive and growing. You may or may not keep your resolutions in the coming year, but God will keep His. He will comfort and strengthen you through His Word as He has promised, and He will bring you the same heavenly blessings in the coming year as He has given you in years past.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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