

Happy New Year! How many times will you say these words to others, and hear them from others on this day? And some of you, who stayed up late, have a jump start on the rest of us. So then, with so many Happy New Year's greetings coming to you today, is there any doubt whatsoever in your mind that you will indeed have a happy new year? Maybe there is a scientific equation which says that if twenty people wish you a happy new year, a happy new year is what you are going to have.

But there is no such equation, is there? A new year is like a cat. If a cat is not happy, telling it to be happy will not make it happy. And even if you try to make it happy by petting it, it may suddenly turn on you and sink its claws or its teeth into your flesh. But people still try anyway, with cats and with new years. They see this new year as an opportunity to start fresh. As if their slate is magically cleaned off when the clock strikes midnight on December 31st.

Yet wishing and wanting something does not make it happen. It can even make it worse. Anyone who fully expects this year to be happy, with all the problems of the old year vanishing, will become greatly frustrated, depressed, and what have you, because that is not how life works. A new year can be pretty cruel when people put their faith in it and set their hope on it.

And yet the year ahead of you will be a good year if God has anything to say about it. And He does. You hear the words of our text every time you come to church. "*The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.*" These are the last words that God speaks to you through the mouth of His pastor before you embark on the week ahead of you. How fitting, therefore, to hear these words as you embark upon the year ahead of you.

Now there is a great difference between the words that we speak to each other, such as "Happy New Year," and the words that God speaks to us. Our words to each other do not necessarily accomplish what they declare, but God's words do. It's because His words are living words. They are powerful, powerful like strong medicine. When He speaks, His words are like the active, yes, the living ingredient in a powerful medicine to do exactly what He declares.

It's why Jesus was conceived within Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and spoke God's words to her. Going back to the beginning, it's why light suddenly was created when God said, "*Let there be light,*" along with everything else He spoke into existence. Coming back to the present day, it's why your sins are actually and truly forgiven when, through the mouth of His pastor, God absolves your sins in the Divine Service. Going to your baptism into Christ Jesus, it's why baptism is so powerful, because God's words are added to the water in the font to make your baptism strong, spiritual medicine for every day of your life. And coming up to the altar, it's why we call this meal a Sacrament. Because God's words are spoken, they do what they declare, giving you Jesus' body and blood with the bread and wine for the forgiveness of your sins. And, my friends, it's why the year ahead of you will be a good one. It's because God places His benediction upon you to bless you through every day of the coming year. His words make it happen.

Now do not think that every day of this new year will be happily free from troubles for you. If every day was a trouble-free day, it would be evidence that God is not blessing you. There are times, many times even, when God blesses us with troubles. He can and does bless us with sorrows, with sicknesses, and more. With things that we would not call blessings.

But they are. Your faith would die, and so would mine, were God to keep problems out of our lives. He refines our faith with fire writes St. Peter. He does not lead us around the valley of the shadow of death. He leads us through it.

And so, if you are wondering how the year 2023 will go for you, I can quite honestly tell you it will be just like last year. A year of ups and downs. A year of much joy and of great disappointment. A year where you and I will fall head-first into sin, and deal with a troubled conscience. And still, a year in which your baptism will not fail you. A year in which Jesus will not abandon you. A year of grace and blessing.

And it is because, with His words of benediction, He places His name upon you. The name that was given to you in your baptism. The name above every name. The name which does what it says: Jesus, which means the One who saves.

This name was assigned to Jesus, as we heard in our Gospel for today, on the day He was circumcised. As a tiny baby He shed His first drops of blood for you. Already then He was your Savior. For even one drop of Jesus' blood cleanses the most vile, sinful heart. And His blood is upon you, for you are baptized, and with His name, the sign of His bloody cross was, and always is, marked upon you.

It's why the last words of His benediction are, "*And give you peace.*" God is at peace with you. No matter who you are. No matter how great were your sins in the past year, and years. The sign of the cross is made with these words of blessing, for it is Jesus' death and resurrection for you which is your peace with God. And it is why God forgives you. Not because you resolve to do better in the new year. God forgives you because of Jesus, because of His sufferings, death, and resurrection for you.

And because you have a forgiving God who speaks His word of blessing upon you, it is good for you and me to stop what we are doing, to reflect back on the past year – any sinfulness that made it past the striking of midnight, any guilt that still bothers us, even overwhelms us – and give it all over to the Lord. Lay it at the foot of His cross. Drown it in the water of our baptism. And know this, believe this, and rejoice in this, that God does truly forgive you. Not just some of you. All of you. Each and every one of you He forgives for the sake of Jesus.

And this is why, as the Lord lifts up His countenance upon you today, and every day of the new year, you will have peace, the peace that God gives to you. Amen.