

Numbers 6:22-27

“Happy New Year!” We all give this greeting, but what does it really mean? Is it along the same line as, “Have a nice day!” only longer? - “Have a nice year!” Or is there more to it than that? To understand this mystery it may be helpful to note where we put the emphasis. It’s never on the first or the last words in the phrase...”Happy New Year!” or “Happy New Year!” But it’s always on the second word, “Happy New Year!” Like a snake shedding its old skin, people by the scores stay up till midnight, drink champagne, and greet perfect strangers as if they were old friends, cheering when the new year arrives because at last the old year with all its problems, grief’s, and mistakes is in the past. A new slate is before us. It’s a chance to start over--to get in shape by dropping those extra pounds; to live within our means and finally become debt-free; to make a new beginning with tired and strained relationships. When January 1st brings in a new year, we have the idea that now things will be different. A new year with new opportunities lies before us, and so we remind each other and encourage each other with the words, “Happy New Year!”

How has it been working so far? How many new years have you brought in...ten, twenty, sixty, even more? You’d think by now people would have learned - we would have learned - that saying, “Happy New Year!” does not make it so. The new year does not bring with it a new slate. The problems of the old year do not magically disappear on January 1st, no matter how hard we party the night before. Problems, in fact, can become worse especially if we expect good things to happen in the new year, and they don’t. Depression can set in. Some contemplate suicide. Some carry it out. A new year can be a cruel thing when people put their faith in it and set their hopes that their lives will take a turn for the better.

The year before you, however, can and will be a good year if God has anything to do with it...and He does. Our words and phrases, our new year’s greetings, even our resolutions will not change things for the better, for the future is not in our hands. But it is in the hands of your God. And His words to you, therefore, make this new year not something to fear, not something to fret over, but a year in which, no matter how happy or sad it is, you will be truly blessed by a loving God.

You have heard the words of our text many times. “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.” Almost every week God, through His pastor, gives these words to you. And today, as you leave His House and prepare to embark on your journey through the new year, these words go with you.

They are not a pious wish as if God was saying, “I hope your day and this new year go well for you.” The difference between our words and God’s words to us is dramatic. When we say, “Happy New Year!” nothing happens. They are just words. Nice words, encouraging words, but they have little to do with how happy our new year will be. But when God speaks His words to us, what they declare is not a wish, but a reality. God’s word to Zechariah announced that he would have a son...and John the Baptist was born. God’s word to Mary announced that she would be with child by the Holy Spirit...and Jesus was conceived within her and was born for you. And when God’s word to you is that He will bless you in the new year, that His face will shine on you and be gracious to you, that He will look upon you with favor and give you peace, you can put your faith in what He says, for His words make it so.

This does not mean, my friends, that every day of this year will be happy for you and trouble-free. When God says He will bless and keep you, it is according to what He knows is best for us, not

according to what we want for ourselves. And sometimes He blesses us with troubles. Sometimes He keeps us for Himself by allowing our problems to get the best of us. If we were in heaven, every day would be happy. But we're not there yet. We live in a world of temptation, and sin dwells within us. We are not yet walking in the garden with God. We are still in the battle here on earth. We're soldiers fighting our flesh, the world, and the Old Evil Foe. Christ fights for you, alongside of you, and so He sees how easily we give up. He knows our weaknesses. And so as He blesses us with good things day after day, sometimes those good things are sorrows, and sicknesses, and grief's which are meant to keep us humble; to keep us armed with His Word for the fight; to keep us from closing our eyes to the enemy in the heat of the battle.

Yet in this new year be assured that God makes His face to shine on you in all graciousness. If you think over the past year, and especially all the ways in which we have sinned in thought, word, and deed; how we have offended God by turning away from His love again and again; all our sins that we are aware of, and so many that we are not aware we have done--it is truly an amazing thing that God does not frown on us, that His face shines with grace and not with fiery anger. But God's word to you tells you today, this very minute, and each and every day of this year that God has nothing but underserved love for you. And this is not because it's our lucky day. It's because of Jesus. He took the fire out of God's face. He endured the frown, the anger, the punishment for you. God was not gracious to His Son as He hung on the cross dying for you, so that today He is, and will be, gracious toward you.

“The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.” Because of Jesus, God looks on you with favor. He does not, nor will He ever, turn away from you, no matter what sorrows you are enduring, no matter what troubles come your way, no matter how terrible your sins against Him. God looks on you with eyes of love. He accepts you, He approves of you. And it's not ever because of how we live. It's only because Jesus lived, suffered, and died for you. It's because in your baptism into Christ, everything He did is yours by faith.

In Christ Jesus, therefore, we have peace with God. At this time of the year many are crying for world peace, an end to fighting and war. Yet how much more precious is peace with God. A person who is fighting with God cannot be at peace with anyone. If you are fighting with another, it's because you are really fighting with God. But friend, God is at peace with you. Jesus is your peace. The war is over. God forgives you completely for every sin of yours. He is at peace with you, and so be at peace. Be reconciled to Him, and be at peace with others.

With these words of God--His blessing, His face of grace, His favor and peace--with such words given to us in Jesus, and given to you today again as you receive the Sacrament of the Lord...”Depart in peace!” He says to you...how can this new year not be a good year? Happy or sad, many troubles or not, you have the benediction of your God, His promise before you. And so to you I can say with all confidence, “A Joyous and Blessed New Year!” Amen.