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St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE  
New Year's Eve  
December 31, 2015  
Text: Isaiah 30:15; Romans 8:31b–39

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today, December 31<sup>st</sup>, has a few different designations! Considered in the light of the Christmas season, it's the seventh day of Christmas! I guess we should have 7 swans-a-swimming. But alas! Swans are in short supply around here.

A much older way – a liturgical, Christological way – to consider December 31<sup>st</sup>, is that today is the Eve of the Circumcision and Name of Jesus. It's the only occasion in the Church's lectionary where a single verse is appointed for the Gospel reading. It's Luke 2:21, "And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." According to Law of Moses, all 8-day old infant boys must be circumcised. In the ancient Church, this occasion in the life of our Lord was observed with much more solemnity. So much so that it warranted an "eve" service just like Christmas.

At least two things must be said about this verse from Luke 2: First, Mary's divine Son receives officially and formally the name proclaimed by the angel Gabriel (Lk 2:31; Mt 1:21). You shall call His name Jesus for He will save His people from their sins. That's not insignificant since His name is the only name given to us whereby we can be saved (c.p. Acts 4:12)! Second, by receiving circumcision according to the Law of Moses, Jesus is already – at 8 days old – fulfilling the Law on our behalf by shedding His blood. The eternal Son of God became incarnate of the Virgin Mary in order to save the world from the powers of sin and death. That holy task began early! It's well worth remembering and giving thanks for the 8 day old, circumcised Jesus.

But the most common way for us to consider today is quite simply New Year's Eve. It's about as secular and non-religious as you can get. Don't misunderstand me here. That doesn't make it bad. And it's certainly appropriate that we gather tonight in Christ's name to pray, praise, and give thanks for the end of one year and the beginning of a new.

It seems there are, at least, two emotions that interplay with each other on New Year's Eve. The first is weariness. Let's face it. The December Christmas season is mentally,

physically, emotionally, and financially exhausting. Christmas is the only holiday observed at all levels of society that requires a full month of preparation and celebration. Think about that for a moment. Independence Day doesn't receive that kind of universal attention. Neither does Thanksgiving, Veteran's Day, or any other holiday, secular or sacred. For us liturgical Christians, Holy Week and Easter doesn't even require that much focused energy. I checked my email on December 26, and one of the first hyperlinks I saw was one entitled "Christmas Fatigue." I didn't bother with reading the articles. I was too tired!!

2,700 years ago, the prophet Isaiah spoke to a weary, fearful people, though the source of their weariness was very different from ours. They were facing international danger from enemies abroad and internal danger from corrupt enemies within. The Lord spoke to His people through Isaiah's prophetic ministry in order to give them words of direction and comfort, "For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength'" (Is 30:15). Repentance and faith were the God-given solutions to their wearied souls. Repentance – turning away from sin and disobedience to God's Word – and living by faith in God's goodness to save, redeem, forgive, and sanctify for all eternity. That's the Lord's renewal program. Repentance and faith bring renewed peace and strength.

New Year's Eve is a most natural occasion to reflect upon the events of the old year: 2015. That too can be a wearying task. This past year had its share of failures, mistakes, and unfulfilled hopes. Did you make any resolutions in January 2015? Did you keep them? If so, good for you. If not, you're not alone. To be sure, there were many great things, many wonderful blessings for which we should be thankful. But life in this world can be a valley of tears.

The apostle Paul knew failure and the nagging reality of past sins. He called himself the least of all the apostles precisely because he had persecuted Christ's Church before his conversion. Stephen's blood was on his hands not to mention all the Christians who had suffered at his hands when he was trying to destroy Christ's Church. But Paul knew the healing grace of repentance and saving faith. For he writes in Philippians 3:4–15,

<sup>4</sup>If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:

<sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. <sup>7</sup>But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup>...For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in

him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—  
 ...<sup>11</sup>that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead...<sup>13</sup>Brothers ... one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Let those of us who are mature think this way...

Paul had learned and experienced the promise given by Isaiah. Through repentance and faith, Paul knew the strength and grace of the Lord Jesus. All the sins of the past had been forgiven because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. On this last day of 2015, we should apply Paul's inspired words to our won lives: One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind (2015 or before) and straining forward to what lies ahead, we press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

The second emotion that is often felt on New Year's Eve is optimism. The next year is fresh and promises new challenges as well as offering opportunities for blessings. Once again the apostle Paul helps us understand these things faithfully and appropriately. In Romans 8:31–32 he asks two powerful question, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all thing?" Of all people on this beautiful planet, we Christians have the greatest reason for optimism, not only on New Year's Eve but on any day of the year. God the Father gave us the greatest gift in heaven and on earth: His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus born of the Virgin Mary. Through Jesus, God the Father gives us His love and grace and security. If the Father gives us His beloved Son, will He not surely give us everything we need to prosper in body and soul? The answer is a definite and resounding yes. All things beneficial for our eternal well-being will be given to us in Christ Jesus. That indeed is reason for abounding joy and eternal optimism.

We press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

A Happy and blessed 2016 to you all.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.