

Pastor Kenneth Mars  
St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE  
New Year's Eve – 6:00 p.m.  
December 31, 2017  
Text: Isaiah 30:15

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

What were some of the highlights for your 2017? A memorable family vacation? A total solar eclipse? Monumental firsts in the life of children or other loved ones? A mission trip to a foreign country? All of us have unique lists. What stands out to me as a congregational highlight was our celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Didn't we have a marvelous, joyous season of rejoicing in the work God did through His 16<sup>th</sup> century servants: Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and so many, many others?

It all began rather inauspiciously when a backwater German Augustinian friar posted 95 academic statements of debate, written in Latin, on the Church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Today, we simply call them Martin Luther's *95 Theses*. Most people of Luther's day couldn't read Latin. And the public debate at the University of Wittenberg never took place. According to God's inscrutable wisdom, the debate took place all over Europe, really all over the world; but only after they had been translated into German and mass produced for all of Europe using that relatively new invention: the printing press.

To this day, the debate that began some 500 years ago is still raging. The debate centers around the nature, priority, and efficacy of the saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, by which terrified sinners can find comfort, hope, forgiveness, joy, and victory over evil, sin, and death itself. Luther, and the Church which bears his name, maintained that Christ's Gospel must have the priority in Christ's Church. Without the Gospel, there can be no Church, no grace, no indwelling of the Holy Spirit, no Sacraments, no resurrection, no forgiveness of sins, no repentance, no life everlasting. The saving Gospel of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus must have the preeminence in Christ's visible Church.

In order to remember and give thanks for this great event in the life of Christ's holy Church, I want to consider Luther's first statement from the *95 Theses*. It goes like this, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

Matthew 4:17 says, "Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Repentance is that urgent message one finds throughout the

Bible. Repentance simply means changing your mind so that you no longer follow the way of sin, disobedience, God's wrath, and condemnation. Instead, the repentant believer pursues righteousness, virtue, obedience, God's favor, His love and grace, and all His present and eternal blessings through faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand is what Jesus preached at the beginning of His earthly ministry. Repentance applies to all 365 days of the year, not just December 31<sup>st</sup>. Remember what Luther so faithfully and biblically wrote 500 years ago, "... the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

A life lived in daily repentance is a true gift of God the Father almighty. The prophet Isaiah wrote about the renewed strength that come from a life of repentance and faith. Ponder these words and receive our Lord's rest, "For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved (that's repentance!); in quietness and in trust shall be your strength'" (Isaiah 30:15). I don't know about you, but I could use a little more strength. I'm not talking about physical stamina (though having 22-hour energy every day would be marvelous) but about the spiritual strength of the Lord. Another OT writer proclaimed that the joy of the Lord is our strength (Neh. 8:10). Repentance and faith produces salvation and strength. The Lord joy gives strength. The Lord is the strength of His people says the Psalmist in 27:8. The apostle Paul boldly proclaims, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). True spiritual strength and joy come through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus. May He give these gifts to us in abundance in the New Year.

It's the end of the year. That's a natural time for reflection. Did you keep your 2017 New Year's Resolutions and other goals you set for yourself this year? Yes. No. As we look back on the year, we see accomplishments, failures, and many, many unexpected turns along the way. How was your life of repentance and preparation for the kingdom of heaven? It's a difficult question. But this is a good time for evaluation, for repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus.

But we must be careful about how we conduct these times of self-evaluation. It's easy to fall into the trap of self-delusion, a failure to see our lives for what they actually are. Scripture teaches us that our hearts are desperately wicked and easily prone to justify our sinful actions. King David warns against the deceptiveness of secret sins and the inclination of the heart toward evil. In Psalm 19:12-13, David writes, "Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I

shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.” Did you notice the inability to discern the hidden sins of the heart? How easily they can take over our lives!

King David, in Psalm 141:3–4, warns against the evil inclination of our hearts, “Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips! Do not let my heart incline to any evil, to busy myself with wicked deeds in company with men who work iniquity, and let me not eat of their delicacies!” Lord, keep our hearts away from sin. Create within us clean hearts and renew a right spirit within us.

Not only must we avoid self-deception, but we must also avoid allowing judgmentalism place you outside of God’s grace and mercy. Listen to how the apostle Paul evaluates his ministry in I Corinthians 4:1–5. I’ll add comments as I go along:

<sup>1</sup>This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. <sup>2</sup>Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. <sup>3</sup>But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup>For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. <sup>5</sup>Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

In the end, what really matters is what God says about you. Entrust yourselves to the goodness and kindness of our heavenly Father as dear children filled with the Spirit of His Son, Jesus. Through Jesus, we will receive our commendation from God the Father. This is why repentance and faith, that is, the Lord’s saving Gospel must have the priority in our congregations and in our lives. The Gospel is the saving word of Jesus that says, “In Me, you have abundant life. No one can take you out of my loving hands, not sin, not Satan, not adversity nor prosperity, nothing in this world or the world to come. For I work all things together for your good.” So says Jesus to you!

May 2018 be one of repentance, faith, the joy of the Lord, and a courageous and living hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. A Happy New Year 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.