

Looking Both Ways  
New Year's Eve 2016  
Isaiah 63:7-9

I will recount the steadfast love of the LORD, the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely." And he became their Savior. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

In the ancient calendar used by the Romans, from which our calendar was created, the name of each month had a meaning.

One month in the ancient Roman calendar that had an especially descriptive name was January. The Latin word *janua* means a door or window from which a person may look both ways, in other words, in and out--forward and back. Historians say that January is also derived from the name Janus, a common household god among the Romans. He was often depicted facing in two directions. Basically, he was looking forward and back. As we stand at the doorway to the month of January and a new year we naturally look back over the way we have come. We also naturally look ahead to the new year and where we are going. As we celebrate this new year's eve we look at the year that has past and the year that lies ahead.

Our text comes from the end of Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah had described the changes the Messiah--the promised Savior-- would bring to God's people in the chapters before our text. Here he went on to describe the effect His preaching would have on those in Israel who were faithful to God. He introduces the final section of his prophecy by using the prayer of someone who recognizes all that the Lord has done for his people.

To this prayer we would all say, "Amen." It reminds us that the Lord has been kind to us. Tonight we will tell of his kindnesses and deeds for which he is to be praised. This prayer from Isaiah's prophecy reminds us to look back in appreciation of

God's grace in 2016 and to look ahead with anticipation for more of God's grace in 2017.

We don't have to look very far back in the year that is ending to be reminded of God's undeserved love. In fact we really only have to look back one week. A week ago tonight was Christmas Eve. We were reminded that Christ was born to live the holy life we have not lived and to die under the just punishment for our sins. That is the clearest and most complete reminder of God's kindness and love for us. We rejoice that we have had the privilege to once again celebrate his birthday and speak about his great love for us.

But obviously our spiritual blessings for 2016 weren't confined to Christmas. For the last 52 Sundays our God has fed us with his Word when we gathered for worship. We followed Jesus to the cross, we shouted, "He is risen!" We listened to the words and works of our Savior God. In Bible class, and Sunday school, and through our personal time in God's Word we have found healing and hope. We have felt God's presence and been reassured of his love when we sinned. As we celebrate God's grace tonight we look back in appreciation of a whole year of enjoying the Word of God and all that it has brought to us.

In 2016 we also often received the pledge that we are forgiven children of God as we received the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. There Jesus invited us to eat and drink the proof that full payment for our sins has been made. At His table we were reminded that we will eat and drink with him in the Kingdom of heaven. Although we have many things to be thankful for this New Year's eve we are most thankful for these Means of Grace that God has given us--His Word and Sacraments.

The person praying in this text from Isaiah acknowledged that the Lord had done many good things for his people.

This reminder of what God did for his people of old reminds us of what God does for his people today. He still does great things for us. Who of us can't tell of the kindnesses of the Lord? Take a moment to look back in appreciation for all that the Lord has done for us this past year. Who of us can't tell of the deeds for which God is to be praised? Our Lord

has given us shelter, food, and clothing this past year. We have enjoyed the blessings of family and friends. We have enjoyed God's creation for another year. The Lord has provided us with blessings beyond belief, way more than we can use.

But someone might say that not everything in 2016 was all that good. Someone might say, "I had troubles and problems. In fact this year was one of the worst I have ever had. I lost my job. I was sick. I faced financial problems and other troubles. 2016 was not a good year and I really don't see all that much that God has done for me."

Yes, we face the temptation to feel that way and have those kinds of thoughts. But when Isaiah recorded this prayer he could have said something similar to that. He and other believers faced persecution. Their country was under the threat of foreign invasion. Things were very bad and seemed very uncertain. Yet, Isaiah knew that no matter how bad things looked God was with him and his people. Isaiah knew that he could only see things from a human perspective. If he could look at things from God's perspective he would know that God was concerned about him and doing everything for his eternal good. Because of God's grace all of us can look back at this year with appreciation. No matter what has happened the Lord has been good to us.

We are reminded that even when things looked bad in 2016 God was with us. "In all their distress he too was distressed." God was distressed with us in our distress. Through all the trials and troubles we faced in 2016 God was sympathetic to us. It always makes us feel better when someone knows what we are going through, when someone understands. That is a reason to celebrate God's grace. Our God felt the pain we felt. When we were shedding tears of sorrow our God was watching us and caring about us.

"And the angel of his presence saved them." We may never know all the close calls we had last year. We may never know how many disasters the Lord protected us from. We may have walked through the valley of the shadow of death and not even known it. But we do know the Lord's presence saved us from disaster. He sends his angels to protect us and he shelters us under his protecting

hand.

And what reason did the Lord have for allowing troubles into our life this past year? He used all the things that seem bad to draw us into a closer relationship with Him. They also served to remind us that the Lord is our strength and our only way out of trouble.

When a baby giraffe is born its mother does something that we might consider cruel. The mother gives her offspring a good kick. When it doesn't get up the mother gives it another kick. This process is repeated again and again until the baby giraffe slowly stands up. Then the mother knocks the baby giraffe down again so it remembers how it got up. Why does the mother do this? The baby giraffe has to be able to walk very quickly after birth. There are lions, hyenas, leopards, and wild dogs that enjoy baby giraffes. If the mother didn't do what looks like a cruel thing the baby would never survive. The Lord does a similar thing to us through trials and troubles. He knocks us down to teach us how to get up. He teaches us where to go for help. He teaches us how to be strong and face the attacks of the devil and this world. Our struggles in 2016 have made us stronger Christians. We have learned to rely on God more fully. Yes, we can even look back on the bad things of this past year with appreciation. God has been with us. God has carried us and protected us.

What is the one thing we look forward to with anticipation in 2017? It is God's mercy and grace. We know that we will fail many times. We know that we will fall short of God's perfect and holy will. But we also know that our Lord's mercy is new every day. We know that our God will forgive us through the blood of his Son Jesus Christ. No matter how badly we stumble next year our God will have mercy on us. We have blown it many times this year and will blow it again next year, but our God will forgive us. We look ahead to 2017 with anticipation of God's grace and forgiveness. Once again we will find hope and comfort in the Word. For another year we will be built up in our faith and find guidance for our life. In 2017 we will see souls enter the kingdom of God through the sacrament of Baptism. We will grow in love for one another as we stand together before this altar and receive the body and blood of our Savior. 2017 will be a good year no matter what happens because we

have the one thing we need. We have the means by which God brings us his grace. We have his Word and Sacraments.

So how does our knowledge of God's grace and goodness for this new year affect our plans for 2017? How do we look ahead with anticipation in a God pleasing way. We put all our dreams and goals in the Lord's hands. We have to be careful how we look forward with anticipation. We are given this New Year's advice in James 4:13-15, "Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.

In the good times and in the bad times God is with us. As his children we tell of all the good things he has done for us. In 2016 we have enjoyed his love, and grace, and blessing. We have enjoyed his Word and Sacraments. He has been with us through everything. He has felt our pain and sorrow. We look back in appreciation. We also look forward with anticipation. God will be with us again in this new year. He will provide us with what we need both physically and spiritually. He will comfort us and share our pain and sorrow. Today as you ring in the new year, celebrate God's grace. Grace that moves us to look back with appreciation. Grace that allows us to look ahead with anticipation.

Peter wrote: But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

A day is like a thousand years. I've had days like that. Yes, some of our days fly by. We try to pack so much into them. We plan them carefully to make sure that everything that must take place happens. Some of my days seem like a thousand years. It seems as if time is frozen and I cannot move on to things that are fun or exciting.

Our God will be with us in those days, too. We trust him to guide us and care for us and renew us and forgive us and empower us and to save us.

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