

Scripture and Sermon for January 1, 2017

Isaiah 63:7-9

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord,
the praiseworthy acts of the Lord,
because of all that the Lord has done for us,
and the great favor to the house of Israel
that he has shown them according to his mercy,
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 distress.

It was no messenger or angel
but his presence that saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Matthew 2:13-23

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.

This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet,
"Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Let us pray...Amen.

With the Old Year behind us, and the New Year unfolding before us, my ears are particularly attuned to the first lines from the Isaiah passage this

morning: *I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us...*

It seems only natural to spend some time reflecting as the last year winds down, all the world contemplates that year that was. Magazines publish year-end issues with timelines of newsworthy events, radio and television have specials on the happenings of the year, but once we turn the corner on Christmas, it's all about the New Year. What will happen this year? What will happen with Congress, the new president, what will happen in the Middle East? The world gives us only a little bit of time to reflect back on the year that 2016 was, before we are dazzled with the wonder of what might be in 2017.

Count me as one who believes that we could all spend a little more time reflecting and meditating on the *gracious deeds of the Lord*. The difficult times we survived, the healings we experienced, the Grace we were given, even when we weren't being particularly faithful. What about the comfort we received, or the peace that came over us when we were distraught. Or the steadfast presence of the Lord in the form of a friend, or stranger who helped when we were in need.

So for most of the world, the year that just was will be measured by a recounting of tragedies and deaths and scandals, newsworthy events that sell magazines and cause advertisers to flock to the television or radio, God's faithful will be taking a page out of Isaiah's book, and recounting all the things the Lord has done that cause us to praise God.

Each of us has a list of praiseworthy events from last year, and each of us is at risk for neglecting that list unless we set aside a little time before the end of the year to recount the things we consider praiseworthy.

It may be a humble list, it may be a magnificent list, but it's *your list!* And only you can decide what to recount, what to remember, what to put on your list of things God has done for you.

Often lost in the shuffle of New Year's resolutions, recounting God's gracious deeds in our lives rarely gets first billing. A new year comes in, replacing the old year, and 12 months later that new year *is* the old year. It's so easy to get caught up in the hype of modern New Year's celebrations, and recounting God's blessings in our lives gets short shrift.

But not this year. This year we have been blessed with the writing of Isaiah to remind us that God's faithful children would do well to recount God's gracious deeds in their lives often. And here is the miracle of faith and scripture coming together: when we can take a little time to remember the good things God has done for us in our lives, it takes some of the sting out of the hard times, the painful times.

Remembering God's gracious deeds over the last year tends to soften the memory of the harder times. It won't erase them, they actually happened, there *was* pain and difficult times last year, there were sad times last year, but their memory isn't as harsh after we've praised the God from whom all blessings flow.

I guess I've celebrated 53 new years in my life, and I can tell you that the majority of them did not include recounting the blessings I received at the hand of the Lord. I can also tell you that from now on, that's exactly how I plan on celebrating the next 53 new years: by putting God's blessings in perspective, by remembering the things God has done in my life, by lifting up the praiseworthy things God has done, and by spending less time ruminating about the painful moments of the year.

Each of us welcomed the new year in our own way. Some of us were surrounded by a big crowd, some a small crowd, some with just our families, and some of us alone. But no matter where we are, no matter who we are with, each of us can make some time to reflect, to recount, to rejoice at the blessings we have received at the gracious hand of the Lord.

In theory, there is no shortage of evidence of God's steadfast love. But it's up to you and me to put a personal story with the theory. It's up to you and me to make that list of things that can cause us to praise God, and it's up to us to actually do it, to actually thank God for those gracious moments.

We aren't expected to share them publicly, and I'm sure many of you are relieved to hear that! Building on our theme from Christmas Eve, sometimes it's more important to quietly reflect on our faith lives than run around telling people about them!

This new year might just be one of those times.

Of course, once you do that, once you recount for yourself the praiseworthy things God has done for you, once you place that concept in your heart, you can't really look at your life going forward the same way ever again.

2017 will be forever altered in our hearts if we spend a few minutes reflecting on the gracious deeds of our Lord, because once we open our eyes to the list of blessings God has bestowed upon us, we will always be looking for them in the future. It's like we can't unsee them! Once we see Christ in the eyes of a stranger, we'll see Christ in the eyes of many of our neighbors!

Once we acknowledge one of God's blessings, we'll then be on the lookout for more blessings as time goes on.

It doesn't mean you and I won't experience some difficult times in the year to come. We can't be naïve in thinking we will be impervious to life's challenges to our health, to our well-being. But if I had told you at the beginning of this sermon that you could affect the future, you would have thought I was crazy.

But just as psychologists think we can change the way we think about the past, and therefore change the past, we can also change the way we think about the future, and thereby affect the future: if we live our lives with our eyes open to the gracious gifts God gives us, we will see the future differently, we will experience the future differently. That is a miracle!

For me, this Isaiah passage is a revelation. It has changed the way I look at my past, and it has changed the way I will look to the future. I hope and pray that something similar will happen for you. Happy New Year. Amen.