

WATCHING IS EASY AS NOTHING SEPARATES US FROM GOD'S LOVE

Hear again the Word of the Lord for this last day of the year, what we in this congregation call, "The Eve of the Name of Jesus,"

For I have been persuaded that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things at hand nor things about to be; not powers; neither height nor depth; not any different created thing, has power to separate us from the sacrificial love of God (which is) in Christ Jesus the Lord of us.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Christmas Day 7/8 Sermon, part A: Every New Year's Eve, in congregations like this one, God's people are reminded of our Lord's call to preparation in watchfulness as we await our Lord's triumphant return. Christian watching is easy, as we have heard that nothing separates us from God's love in Christ Jesus. In this place, services to end the Old Year, and to prepare hearts, minds, and thoughts for the New Year are sparsely attended. Yet, because we understand the need for the prayers of the Church to continue, year-in and year-out, God's services remain here, even when just two or three are found gathered by Christ around His Holy Word. After all, Jesus just told you to:

continue to become prepared, because, at the hour which you do not know the Son of Man comes.²

God has brought you here tonight, not to be encouraged in making New Year's resolutions. There is plenty of that type of Law thinking in the mass media, and, sadly, in many congregations which claim to be founded on the Name of Jesus. He has guided you to this place at this time that His Word might take deeper root in you, so that you will grow in the wisdom, knowledge, and understanding of all that God wills to do

¹ Romans 8:38-39.

² John 12:40.

for you, in you, and through you. To help you grasp that which God is doing here this evening, we should hear a bit about the Feast for which tonight's Vespers is given to prepare us.

For over two hundred years, during the month of each January, the Western Church has variously celebrated the Name of Jesus. By 1962 in the Roman Church, the Feast of the Name of Jesus was placed into canon law that it must be celebrated on the first Sunday of each January (with some adjustment if the Sunday was the first or seventh of the month). In rightly confessing churches, *The Lutheran Hymnal*, published in 1941 combined "The Circumcision," and "The Name of Jesus" into one Feast, to be held on New Year's Day. *Lutheran Worship*, published in 1982, separated the two, putting the "Eve of the Name of Jesus" on December 31, and, "The Circumcision of Our Lord" on January 1. *Lutheran Service Book*, published in 2006, provides the option of keeping the two days separated, the first as preparation, the second as Feast.

All that having been taught, the helpful tradition followed at Catalina Lutheran (which was founded with along the advent of the 1982 hymnal), prepares God's people in this place each year to watch and celebrate the Holy Name of, and first-blood shed by, our Savior. For twenty-nine years, on and off, this congregation has rejoiced in the Word of God on the Eve of the Name of Jesus. With that Word comes the Holy Spirit, to work His gifts among us. As has been declared here in years past, the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit are present through the proclamation of the Word of God.

All of those serve to point us to Jesus and His Work in us and in this fallen creation. It is He Who calls us to watchfulness this evening as we await the New Year and the Feast of Jesus' Circumcision and naming. It is He Whose Word gives us all we each and collectively need to confess with St. Paul:

I have been persuaded that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things at hand nor things about to be; not powers; neither height nor depth; not any different created thing, has power to separate us from the sacrificial love of God (which is) in Christ Jesus the Lord of us.³

God has brought you here now that you might have that conviction as your own. Those words resound with the conviction of a man who died an horrible death for the good confession of the Faith. In fact, since you regularly confess that you hold to the Apostolic Faith, in the Creed you say as part of your daily devotions, or as you, with the Church catholic, recite the ecumenical creeds, you say you believe with Paul's steadfastness. It is no mere "official" ceremonialism to say or sing, *I believe..., We believe..., I believe..., we worship....* If you have been guilty of mouthing the creeds and *Te Deum* with no thought of the power in your words, of your ties to the Faith of the Apostles, turn, and believe that Jesus has shed His blood for you, and given His Name to you with the Water and Word of Holy Baptism! Then, forgiven and renewed, return to the confessions of the Faith with watchfulness and expectation, freed to rejoice in all the glory which you regularly proclaim. St. Paul's words, written long ago to a congregation which would soon suffer through three centuries of on again, off again overt persecution,

³ *Romans 8:38-39.*

and now, for almost seventeen centuries of covert persecution, stand as your bold confession. Hear anew that which the Holy Spirit, through St. Paul, writes to the Church which bears Jesus' Holy Name through all generations:

*If God (is) for us, who (is) against us?*⁴

In the context of St. Paul's letter, that question follows his encouragement of believers' election to salvation in Christ Jesus. He declares that it is God's will that the Holy Spirit would intercede with the Father on behalf of the saints. The saints are the holy ones named with God's Name, who still live in this fallen world in mortal flesh and blood. The saints are you who have died with Christ Jesus and risen to new life in Him.

For most of your lives, if you have been listening to confessional pastors, you have heard that, in Holy Baptism, you have been named with God's Name. In that naming, you have been given the everlasting right to call God, "Father." Bearing His Name, you have been given the divine right to ask Him for His good gifts in such a manner as children might petition their earthly fathers for such things.

That is true even when the world, the devil, or even your own sinful nature presses in with temptation upon you. Tonight, at New Year's celebrations around the world, in our communities, and in our homes, there will be ample opportunities for temptation to lead to sin. The world will test you by having you look back on the old year with its good and bad, and give thanks it is over. The media will try to tempt you to looking forward to the New Year as if its new dawn can bring you all you need to have a

⁴ *Romans* 8:31b.

great life. Your communities may encourage you to drink alcoholic beverages in more than the moderation to which the Lord calls you. If you live in Catalina, your neighbors might encourage you to fire your handgun, long gun, or shotgun into the air (stupid, really stupid, as the rounds have to fall to earth somewhere....) In your homes, you might be led to despair from loneliness or excessive joy from the presence of many relatives and friends, all the while forgetting the Giver of all true Joy. Traditions will not bring you luck in the New Year – for luck is an expression of the false god of Fortune. You can eat your corned beef and cabbage, your sauerkraut balls, and drink your toasts, give your New Year’s kisses to members of the opposite sex, but those traditions will do no true spiritual good for you or anyone else.

Yes, you are free to enjoy all things which the Word of the Lord does not proscribe. Yet, you are also called to rejoice in them in moderation. When you feel the pressures of your family and friends, your community, your world, you are called to remember that, as one named with the Name of God, you are free, old year or new. You are free to offer your prayers, petitions, requests, and thanksgivings to God in the midst of good and evil, even as this evening Psalm prayer service has been doing. You may do so not just because you are commanded by God to pray, nor because He expects you to pray, as Jesus declared, “When you pray, say, Our Father..., “ and so forth. You are free to offer the prayer sacrifices of the New Testament as ones who bear the Name of God,

because through the Word of God you have been fully persuaded by the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God He inspired:

that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things at hand nor things about to be; not powers; neither height nor depth; not any different created thing, has power to separate us from the sacrificial love of God (which is) in Christ Jesus the Lord of us.⁵

That means, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, you are truly free in Christ Jesus our Lord as this old year ends, and the New Year begins. That long sentence declares the height, width, depth, and breadth of God's love for you. Nothing that comes upon you, either spiritual or worldly, temporal or eternal can detach you from that which God has done for you in Christ Jesus. His blood has been shed for you. His blood has washed over you. His blood has cleansed you. And, for you who have learned to confess the truth of Scripture, His blood feeds you forgiveness, and strengthens you to life everlasting. His blood will see you through to the Last Day, when your Savior, our Savior, Jesus whose Name we bear, will return visibly to all who have, or will, ever live.

Tomorrow morning, should the Lord for Whom we are watching not come on the clouds with power and glory, Christmas Day 7/8 Sermon, Part B will be proclaimed. In the meantime, you have been freed, through the Word of God, to continue to have a very Merry Christmas Season and a Happy New Year!

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Eve of the Name of Jesus Sermon (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)
Psalm 8, Psalm 110; Isaiah 30:15-17; Romans 8:31b-39; Luke 12:35-40
December 31, 2010

Pastor Michael A. Morehouse SOLI DEO GLORIA

⁵ Romans 8:38-39.