

CONSISTENCY AND STABILITY IN THE WORD

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

Hear the selected theme text for this first day of 2014, the eighth day of Christmas, and the day the Church celebrates the minor feast of the Circumcision of our Lord:

אָגַהּ יְהוָה קִי-אָגַי עֲבַדְתָּ אֲנִי-עַבְדְּךָ בְּוֶאֱמָתְךָ לְמוֹסְרֵי:

I, O YHWH, thus – I (am) Your servant; I (am) Your servant, Son of Your maidservant; my bonds for me You have loosed.

In the Church, on this first day of the New Year, we are free to give thanks that God has loosed us from the bonds of sin, death, and hell. We can do so on account of the consistency and stability of the Word of God which we hear so regularly. For us, this morning, God’s Word as He assembled us together gave us comfort from hearing something old, something usual in the Church’s orders of service. That is namely, many of the words of the 116th Psalm. Hear them again:

מָה אֶשְׂבֵּיב לַיהוָה כָּל-תַּגְּמוֹלוֹהִי עָלָי:

What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me?

כּוֹס-יְשׁוּעוֹת אֶשָּׂא וּבְשֵׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא:

I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD,

וְנָדַרְתִּי לַיהוָה אֶשְׁלֵם נְגִדָה-נְאֻם לְכָל-עַמּוֹ:

I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.

וְנָדַרְתִּי לַיהוָה אֶשְׁלֵם נְגִדָה-נְאֻם לְכָל-עַמּוֹ

I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people,

בְּחִצְרוֹתוֹ בַּיִת יְהוָה בְּתוֹכְכִי יְרוּשָׁלַם:

in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem.²

Those words are sung in about 1/3 of the Divine Services in this place. They serve as an Offertory. As such they are fine, and speak of that which God’s people bring

¹ Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: With Westminster Hebrew Morphology. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Ps 116:10–19). Stuttgart; Glenside PA: German Bible Society; Westminster Seminary.

² <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%20116&version=ESV>

into His Presence as a thanksgiving for all He does for them, for us, for you. But, as they are set in the hymnal, there are a couple of verses missing from their midst. They are:

יִצְקָר בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה מוֹתָה לְחַסִּידָיו :

Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.

אָנֹכִי יְהוָה קַי־אֲנִי עֲבָדְךָ אֲנִי־עַבְדְּךָ בְּוַאֲמַתְךָ לְמוֹסְרָי :

O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant. You have loosed my bonds.

Those words are less familiar in the Church's regular pattern of worship response to God. Perhaps they were left out because that particular order of Divine Service was written in the 1970s with a particular intent to play up our human roles in worship, and to deemphasize the truth that real Divine Worship begins and ends with God. Or, they may have been left out because singing about death in the Lord's service may seem so negative, a bit depressing to people who, after all, it was maintained, come to Church to feel good about themselves.

Yet, death in the Offertory song of the Church is fitting, as it comes right before the Sacrament in Christ's Body and Blood which was put into effect by His death! It is Jesus' death, foreshadowed in His shedding of first-blood in the, until then, eternal fight against sin, death and the devil, of which we sing. It is Jesus' death, even as we rejoice in the image of the infant Son of God's maidservant, Mary, that fulfills these words for us:

I, O YHWH, thus – I (am) Your servant; I (am) Your servant, Son of Your maidservant; my bonds for me You have loosed.

Jesus, in being placed under the Law in His circumcision, lived from then on the perfect human life. He never sinned Himself, though He was tempted. Jesus did not sin, even when He bore in His sinless Person the sins of the whole world, and that means your sins, all of them. He who was bound in sin, bore that sin into death and the grave.

There, the Father with the Spirit, loosed the bonds of the Son, and freed Him for the resurrection. Our Psalm of the day declares:

*Gracious (is) YHWH, and righteous, and our Elohe (is) merciful.*³

God, for a time withheld His mercy and grace from His Son on account of the righteousness which needed to be fulfilled for you. In Jesus' death and resurrection, which you received with the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, you too had your bonds loose. As the child of God's maidservant, the Holy Christian Church on earth, you have received God's mercy in the blood of Jesus. Perhaps in this New Year of our Lord, as the Praise Psalms continue, you will hold more dearly that which God does new for you each day, namely, rescue you from falling back into unrepentant sin, and from that into eternal separation from His grace. For that you may sing that which is not in our hymnals in the Offertory:

: הַלְלֵי יְהוָה .⁴

That ending to the Psalm is missing from that which we chant so regularly in this place:

: הַלְלֵי יְהוָה .⁴

The next time we sing that Offertory, perhaps you will remember to Praise the Lord because of that which He has done for you, namely showed you how precious your death is, and that He has loosed your bonds. As you praise the Lord this day, by receiving His gifts, you are free then to reflect on this question:

What will this New Year bring?

Certainly bad things as well as good things will come. This Year of our Lord 2014 certainly started with a bang – in more ways than one. From the fireworks at the Sydney Opera House, to the world's tallest building in Dubai, to Times Square, to fireworks and guns going off in Catalina, people rang in the New Year. On the other

³ Psalm 116:5.

⁴ (Hallelu Yah in Hebrew; translated to English as Praise the LORD.)

hand, two terrorist attacks in Volgograd Russia killed at least 30 people, and injured another 60 at the site where the Sochi Olympics are to be held. The Devil, death and their agents do not celebrate the joy of forgiveness, and love to be spoilers on holidays, even New Year's days. That is why this verse was chosen for emphasis in the dawn of this new day of the New Year of our Lord:

*I, O YHWH, thus – I (am) Your servant; I (am) Your servant,
Son of Your maidservant; my bonds for me You have loosed.*

Whatever this New Year of our Lord may bring, you are free to cling to the words of this opening Psalm of the Year. Yes, you sing parts of it regularly. Yet, you are also free to make all its truths part of your confession throughout the year. That is so because, in the Jesus of the Scriptures, the Jesus who was placed under the Old Covenant Law by His own blood, that is the Jesus you confess to have done this for you:

*For You have delivered My soul from death,
My eyes from tears,
My feet from stumbling.⁴*

Thank God those are consistent and stable truths no matter what this New Year may bring into your, our, the Church's and the world's lives. In Christ, Who shed His blood for you, you have been delivered. In Christ, your repentant tears are taken away. In Christ, you have been saved from stumbling eternally back into sin. May those realities guide and guard you in this New Year, and grant you a continued Merry Christmas!

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

The Circumcision of Our Lord (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

Psalm 116; Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 2:21

January 1, 2014

Pastor Michael A. Merhouse

Soli Deo Gloria

⁴ Psalm 116:8.