

A NIGHT OF WATCHING IN PREPAREDNESS

Hear again the Word of the Lord for this last day of the year, that which congregations like ours call, “The Eve of the Name of Jesus,”

If God (is) for us, who (is) against us? Certainly, He Who His own Son not having spared, but for us all handed Him over, how then (will He) definitely not with Him the all things to us gift?¹

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

This is the seventh day of Christmas. It is a night for watching in preparedness, even as it is the day to give your true love seven swans a swimming. (According to PNC Bank they would cost: \$13,125.00, a zero percent increase over 2014)²! Those who like to read more into that Christmas Carol than is historically defensible draw forth from that line a teaching that calls the faithful to remember seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. They may be counted as virtue, knowledge, self-control, long-suffering, godliness, brotherly love, and sacrificial love.³

There is also a more Roman take concerning this day’s things to be watchful in remembering. Some in that confession of the Faith would teach that tonight is the time to recall the seven sacraments. Such teachings are attempts at keeping the faithful attentive to God’s gifts. This may be done as the struggles and joys of an old calendar year pass into history while the rewards and challenges of a new year swiftly approach.

Lutherans too may use this seventh day of Christmas to remember God’s gifts. The Lutheran Confessions in the “Apology of the Augsburg Confession” list such

¹ *Romans* 8:31b-32.

² <https://www.pncchristmaspriceindex.com/cpi/#giftprices>

³ *1 Peter* 1:5-6.

presents from God to be Baptism, Holy Absolution, the Sacrament of the Altar. Then they go on to add, as “rightly understood” such gifts as -- Ordination, Matrimony, Prayer, Almsgiving. They even go so far (in the German text) as to add to the list of God’s gifts of grace those benefits that come to His people through the Cross and Tribulations of the Christian. Before you superconquerors of the Faith get all excited: the Confessions to which this congregation and her pastors hold full unequivocal subscription go on immediately to declare of God’s offerings to His people: *Certainly no prudent man will make a large striving over whether seven or more Sacraments will be numbered, certainly (they may be counted) in so far as God’s Word and Command will not be broken!*⁴

(Now, a note for any present and future seminary students hearing that teaching: I have been presenting such truths here for the past eighteen years as text and time have permitted. Please do not walk into your first seminary class, your Vicarage or Internship assignment, or eventual Divine Call and throw out those confessional realities in the first few weeks or even months. Know that in the 1943 *Small Catechism* and the 1946 Koehler edition (p.255), consciences were incorrectly bound into numbering just two Sacraments. (That appears to be a result of our LCMS pro-General Protestant/ Anti-Roman Catholic mid-century phase). In the 1986 edition of the *Catechism*, the Church began to teach that Absolution may be added to the numbering of the Sacraments. That continued in the 2006 edition. It has been taking years to return the Church at large to

⁴ *Concordia Triglotta*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921, 312-313. Translation from the German: mine.

her actual confession of the Faith! Yet you will have the joy of helping folks return to a deeper appreciation for all of God's gifts, which are truly without number)!

All of that having been declared, there is a textual reason for turning your thoughts this evening to God's gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation through His divinely chosen means of grace in the Sacraments. For, it is by remaining in them, that you will be found watchful when our Lord returns. In His gifts, through His work in you, you are being prepared to recline at His unending Feast where He will continue to serve you. But, though we have a foretaste of that at this Altar Table, we are not yet at that eternal Wedding Feast. We have the realities of this fallen creation pressing in on us even now. So, on to our theme text, as Jesus says, by means of the Holy Spirit, working through the translated words of St. Paul:

If God (is) for us, who (is) against us? Certainly, He Who His own Son not having spared, but for us all handed Him over, how then (will He) definitely not with Him the all things to us gift?⁵

Every New Year's Eve, with such words in their midst, God's people are reminded of our Lord's call to remain watchful for His bodily return on the clouds with the Angel Armies. To go back to the seventh day of Christmas and its ancient English gifts for a moment: the evening's readings glide nicely together as swans floating tranquilly in a pond. The texts annually reveal that God gives us Christians all we need to be ready for His final coming. In the Letter to the Romans (my favorite passage in all the Epistles – and I get to proclaim it here every four years!) the Word of comfort for our

⁵ Romans 8:31b-32.

ending an old year and beginning a new one begins with a question: *If God (is) for us, who (is) against us?*⁶

Now, many of you have expressed your concerns about the events that went on in our world in 2015 – in person, in text, in email, in class, in your homes and so on. Some have been tempted to think that this was the year for Christ to return on the clouds. Maybe you have prayed that He would come and end all of our local, regional, national and international sliding into the chaos of evil that unrepentant sinners bring into this fallen creation. A few may have fallen to the temptation to believe that, because of all our/your struggles in and for the Faith we are the chosen generations – the ones who will not have to fall asleep in the Lord to await His return.

Maybe we are – but that will not be on account of us. Our problems and triumphs in the Faith have yet to exceed that which Christians faced in the first three centuries of this era of God's grace. Rather, God knows when the last person to hear and believe the Good News of Jesus Christ has heard, believed, and been saved. Then He shall come – perhaps now.... Perhaps tonight?

Even so, you/we await His return to end all the evil in this creation and to set it anew and sinless after His cleansing fire goes forth. God calls us to watch for His coming... in the Faith... in God's gifts. The Chief One of those is declared in the second question proclaimed in the Letter for this eve:

⁶ *Romans 8:31b.*

Certainly, He Who His own Son not having spared, but for us all handed Him over, how then (will He) definitely not with Him the all things to us gift?⁷

The Apostle Paul, rightly guided by the Holy Spirit, uses a humanly reasonable and logical argument to sustain the faithful while they, you, await our Lord's return. He begins with the reality that God shows that He was really "for us," eternally on our side, when He took on sin, death, and the Satan. He declares the eternal Truth that God loved you, and all who will believe in Jesus the Christ, so much so that He did not spare Him from the punishment you, we, the whole of all humanity, deserved. The Father poured out His wrath on His sin-bearing Son, handing Him over into death that you might live.

Then, the Son was raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven. He placed our human flesh again at the pinnacle of creation – never to fall again. There He rules over all things, even having put His last enemy, death, under His feet.

In time, He connected Himself to you. For most of you, He did that when He caused you to die and rise to new life in Him through the water and Word of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. In that washing, all that you inherited from your first father, Adam, and any sins you added to his, were removed from you. You were connected, joined spiritually to your new Head – Christ Jesus our Lord. God uses that imagery, Head and Body, members and parts, repeatedly in Scripture so that you may be certain that you are united with Jesus. Where your Head is, there you, as part of His Body, will

⁷ Romans 8:32.

go. He is Lord over all, and in Him, so are you now in part (for sin still clings to you), and in eternity, in whole (for then sin will be forever removed from you, and all temptation, and all the effects of Adam's Fall). It is for those things and more that you are being called to be watchful now for the coming of Jesus. If you are tempted to doubt God's gifts while you wait, you may turn to the Word of God which still declares out of the reality of Jesus' being handed over into death in your sins, and raised to declare you right with the eternal Father:

Who will bring (a) legal charge against (the) elect ones of God? God (is) the One declaring right.⁸

That is good to remember as the old passes and the new day arrives. Jesus, in His ascension to the Cross, bound the devil to earth. In Jesus' death, the Satan was removed from free access to the heavenly courts. In Jesus' Ascension into the heavens, He took up the defense, He intercedes for you, before the Judge – the pure, right, holy, Judge of the living and the dead. There He stands, your Advocate – your Defense Attorney with no prosecutor allowed in the courtroom. It is Jesus for you, and no Satan against you. God is not even angry at you in your sins, for Jesus bore them into death and the grave for you! In His resurrection, the Judge declares you right with Himself. St. Paul's guided hand has recorded even more Good News for sinners, for you:

Who (is) the one judging against (you all)? Christ Jesus (is) the One having died, but rather, has been raised, Who remains at the right (Hand) of God, Who also continues to intercede for us.⁹

⁸ Romans 8:33.

⁹ Romans 8:34.

If you did not believe the confession given earlier, the gift that declares that your sins are taken away and that you are declared right with the Father in Jesus, you are given more of God's good gifts that you might stop disbelieving. The eternal courtroom scene is again, and even more clearly declared into your ears. The Word is calling you to faith in the reality that Jesus was raised from the dead to the highest position of power in all of creation. He stands there, pleading on your behalf day and night. There is no one eternally to bring any judgment against you, for that was meted out on Jesus on the cross. There is a right conclusion you are free to hold onto, that which continues to be confessed through St. Paul's inspired hand:

Who will separate us from the sacrificial love of the Christ: pressure, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?¹⁰

That question is more than rhetorical, it demands an answer. And the answer is, "No one, and nothing!" When Paul was moved to write those words, the Church was entering into a couple of centuries of intense persecution. Entire families would be put to death for their confession of Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of sins. People would be called to renounce Jesus. Instead, they would be held firm by Him in the Faith, into death and eternal blessed life. Paul declared in his generation the fulfillment of the Psalm text you now hear, that which I declare to you is valid for our generation of the faithful:

On account of You, we are continually being put to death the whole day (long); We (are ones) having been reckoned as sheep (for) slaughter.¹¹

¹⁰ Romans 8:35.

¹¹ Romans 8:36 (Psalm 43:23 MT).

You may remember that, just a bit ago, I informed you that the Lutheran Confessions numbered as potential Sacraments, “the Cross and Tribulations of the Christian?” The Psalm quote you just heard does support that public testimony of the confessing Church. It declares how the faithful have felt, and believed, when pressures, trials, and physical damages came upon them for their good witness of the Faith. The Word declares how you may feel, and believe we will be in the coming year. Yet, against that we have the sure proclamation of the truth which follows for those who receive God’s grace as they are accounted as sacrifices for the Faith:

But in all these things, we continue to be superconquerors through the One having sacrificially loved us.¹²

In Christ Jesus, you have been reckoned, that is accounted, weighed and balanced. In Him, through receiving His gifts, despite your sinful nature, you have overwhelmingly been given the eternal victory over all fallen creatures, and this fallen creation. Even now, as the darkness of this old year is enveloping this building, and we await the dawning of the New Year, you are reminded that you are, in Christ, greater than any foe who will come up against you.

That leads us to my personal signature block verse. It holds words that sustain one in the fight of the Faith in this life. It is given to hold us in the knowledge and faith of Christ. He has won the war. He has cast out the devil. He alone intercedes for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death. I have owned these words since first

¹² Romans 8:37.

entering into the Office of the Holy Ministry. They are a description of reality that will never pass. May they become for you what they are for men such as me:

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.¹³

Jesus loves you into death and life eternal! As you remain in Him, through His gifts, He will continue to grant you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year for any years to come!

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 45; Psalm 96; Isaiah 30:15-17; Romans 8:31b-39; Luke 12:35-40

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Pastor Michael A. Morehouse

SOLI DEO GLORIA

¹³ *Romans 8:38-39.*