

**JESUS RULES ALL THINGS FOR THE BENEFIT OF HIS NAME BEARERS**

Hear again the Word of the Lord to His Church on this Feast of the Circumcision of our Lord:

*YHWH has utterly blessed you and will watch over you;  
YHWH causes His Face to shine upon you and will show favor to you;  
YHWH will lift up His Face upon you and cause to set peace for you.<sup>1</sup>*

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

Happy New Year and Merry Christmas, Day 8. That is how this morning's "pastoral greeting" began. A few of you are used to gathering to hear God's Word and receive His Sacraments on the first day of each New Year in this place. Others among us are here on this first day of a new year because it falls on a Sunday. Those folks only get to hear today's texts together with God's people about once in every decade.

Some are rejoicing this day that A.D. 2016 is over. Others are a bit sad to see it pass. With either and any emotions aside, this is a New Year of our Lord which will bring forth ups and downs. So it shall be until the Lord returns on the clouds with glory.

As He has not yet returned, the Church has gathered on the New Year's Day to celebrate a "white day." That color means it is a day really dedicated especially to the Lord Jesus Christ. It has been a tradition in congregations to celebrate the start of each new year with the Lord's Service since before the Reformation began. One can find Dr. Martin Luther's sermons for the Circumcision of Jesus in any number of resources.

What we have not heard here is the tradition that the Reformation replaced as the congregations God was moving from tradition focus to Word of God focus. It was a long-standing tradition that preachers, from the pulpit, on each New Year's Day, would declare special New Year wishes, by their social class, to their hearers. Instead of preaching about Jesus' first-blood, shed in the war against sin, the devil and death, they would recite tales that would, as it were called, "distribute the New Year."

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 6:24-26 (MT).

The Reformers put an end to that! They wanted their hearers to hear about Jesus – the blessings He came to give. In the year A.D. 1531, notes from Luther’s First sermon of the day – on just the Circumcision of our Lord – held what he called a short sermon. The notes, translated into English, cross 10 pages, of single-spaced, size 10 font print. That short Luther sermon likely lasted about 40 minutes. In it, he covered extensively Jesus’ incarnation, His circumcision under the Law, His perfect life, His death and resurrection.

(On the other hand, when reduced to Luther-translation size, this sermon is about half as long).

So, today, in keeping with part of the Luther tradition, this sermon’s intent is to declare Jesus’ His incarnation, His perfect keeping of God’s Law, His death for sinners, His resurrection for believers, His ascension to rule all things for the benefit of His Church – the people who have been named with his name. In particular, it is those second and last gifts that we are hearing more about today. They are tied together in words like these which you hear in this place so often:

*YHWH has utterly blessed you and will watch over you;  
YHWH causes His Face to shine upon you and will show favor to you;  
YHWH will lift up His Face upon you and cause to set peace for you.<sup>2</sup>*

Those words declare that the Second Person of the Trinity, He Whom you know to be Jesus, even now looks upon His people with grace and rules all things for His Name bearers. You may know that He does so because he was placed under the Law for those called to the Faith through the Old Covenant rite of circumcision. He kept that Law for all believers unto His own death. Then, having conquered death itself, He rose again from the dead to present those who bear His Name right with the Father who has continued to bless them and watch over them. That is sealed in the faithful, in you, for you have received the Holy Spirit. That One ever points you to the Son, and the peace He has won for you with the eternal Father.

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers 6:24-26 (MT).

For about 35 centuries, God's people of His Old and New Covenant eras have been hearing reminders of His granting His good gifts to them for their now and into eternity. They were, and are, reminded of that every time God's chosen men – the preachers (priests) of the God's Covenantal gifts – declared His blessings upon them with the three-fold benediction. This is the form through which we have planned for you to hear God's Trinitarian blessings today:

*The Lord bless you and keep you.*

*The Lord make His Face shine upon you, and be gracious to you.*

*The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

Throughout the so-called Aaronic benediction, God address His people as one person. That means it is a community, or common-union blessing. The first line speaks the Father's blessing. The second, declares the Son's graces for His people. The third proclaims the Presence of the Holy Spirit and the peace He continues to bring between God and His people. Upon the conclusion of the blessings as they were first given, God tells those who hear it in the Faith what His benediction means when He has it recorded:

*So, they will put My Name upon (the) sons of Israel, and I will bless them.<sup>3</sup>*

Those of you who take time to look over the Sunday texts in their biblical contexts will know that this section of Scripture comes after God has given new congregational regulations for the "life together" of His Old Covenant people. You will have discovered that it is immediately preceded by the Torah concerning those who would take Nazirite vows. These were those who voluntarily committed themselves to pure and holy living for a time (for no human save the Son of Man could do that for any length of time without sin). Finally, the words of blessing for this white day which begins every new calendar year, are followed by the record of the faith-response offerings of the leaders of the tribes of Israel.

(We appear to be most following the practices of those ancient faithful when we freely leave our first-fruit tithes and offerings after a Service's Benediction. They heard

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers 6:27.

the whole counsel of God, received His proclaimed blessings in total and then responded. Some of us closed out another year of God's grace for His people in that manner last evening). Hear again the literal rendering of this benediction in which you are free to start this New Year of our Lord:

*YHWH has utterly blessed you and will watch over you;  
YHWH causes His Face to shine upon you and will show favor to you;  
YHWH will lift up His Face upon you and cause to set peace for you.<sup>4</sup>*

Those words are all, as one, who have been named with the Name of God, as last evening's readings proclaimed. They are for those who grasp the reality that, through God's work in His people, they are united as they receive His blessing and protection; Presence and grace; Presence and peace. The first two lines each contain a statement of Divine reality, and a Divine promise. The third line declares two promises for those who bear God's Name.

All of that ties in with the Catechism lesson chosen for today. It is posted on CLC's website. We intend it to be reviewed each week in the homes of those children who are preparing for the Rite of Confirmation. You who are already confirmed in the Evangelical Faith are certainly free to review each week's selection in order to discern its tie to a given Sunday's readings.

Today, the third petition was chosen for emphasis. That one declares how God's will is done. In particular, it teaches how God restrains and abolishes every wicked counsel of the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. It lets us know that God keeps us in His Faith and favor through His Word. That word, for this week, is His specific blessing, mercy, and grace for His people. (The whole day's service—from preparation to benediction into life lived outside those doors is intended to be lived as a whole under God's grace). We return to the first line that is to be proclaimed over God's people by His chosen messengers until the end of time. This benediction foreshadows that which the

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<sup>4</sup> Numbers 6:24-26 (MT).

Son will deliver as He gives that which some call the “Great Commission.” We hear our Father declare: *YHWH has utterly blessed you and will watch over you...*

The reality that phrase declares is that the Father has already blessed His people. He has, utterly, completely, fully and finally done that through fulfilling His promises to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, all the way down to Joseph, Mary and you! The Father promises to watch over you – in the sense of One Who guards and protects His own. His blessing which endures remains connected, for His chosen people of all ages since, to His Fatherly shielding. From the Father’s blessing and Promise, we hear the Son declare: *YHWH causes His Face to shine upon you and will show favor to you...*

The faithful in the Lord hear that not as Law, but as Gospel. That is, we, you who have received circumcised hearts through clinging to Jesus’ death and resurrection in Holy Baptism, are reminded that God – in Jesus – is personally present with His people. They once long ago, as you will on your last day, beheld the Face of God in Jesus the Christ, and live! As you behold the Presence of Jesus in the means He has chosen, He shows divine favor to you. In beholding the Face of Jesus, you spiritually see the One Who rules all things for your benefit. He keeps you eternally safe from the sinner’s death. He protects you from falling into the deceiver’s clutches to your doom. He rescues you from following your old nature into hell. All this He does as He gives you His power over the unholy trinity through His Word and Sacraments. From the reminder of the Son’s Real Presence with His people, we hear the Holy Spirit declare: *YHWH will lift up His Face upon you and cause to set peace for you...*

There, He Who has bound Himself to work through His proclaimed Word, declares that the Face of God is lifted upon you as One Whose mouth corners are turned up in a smile. To lift up one’s face is a Hebrew expression for a favorable attitude for the person who has come into the bearer’s presence. You might think of this as being represented in the face of a grandparent when a beloved grandson or granddaughter approaches.

Beyond that loving image, the Holy Spirit has promised to establish peace for you. That is, peace with the God Who is the Creator of heaven and earth and all that is in

them. It is eternal peace that comes to those who remain part of the family of God in mortal life and who fall asleep in the Faith.

Knowledge of that, faith in those realities contained in the blessing of the Lord over His people united, is often reflected in the faces of His hearers. Most believers anticipate the Word of the Aaronic blessing, not as “the Service is over,” but as, “I am blessed, free, and one with God and my people of the Lord’s Covenant.” That is why the ancients responded to that blessing with their gifts. It is that which frees you to do the same – every time you hear the benediction and its promises declared over you. The three-fold Word will be proclaimed upon you today, as one. It became yours when you received the death and resurrection of Jesus in that which saves. That you will be free to recall this New Day of this New Year of our Lord 2017. It is yours forever. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

**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)

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

January 1, 2017

*Paster Michael S. Mercheux*

***Soli Deo Gloria***