**Three New Year’s Sermonettes** January 1, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Christmas 1

**Grace Remembered**

***1 Samuel 7:2b-6,10-12***

 *2All the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord. 3And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.” 4So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths [that is, their foreign gods], and served the Lord only. 5Then Samuel said, “Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the Lord for you.” 6 When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, “We have sinned against the Lord…”*

 *10While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. 11The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car. 12Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far has the Lord helped us.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

 Ebenezer \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Scrooge – that’s right. Ebenezer Scrooge. Even if you had never seen any of the more than 20 film versions of *The Christmas Carol* or read Charles Dickens’ book, the name “Ebenezer” just sounds like a mean-spirited, tight-fisted, hard-hearted miser. But the first Ebenezer – that Ebenezer was quite different. On this first day of the new year, remember the original Ebenezer.

 In the first words of our reading, God’s people were oppressed. This frequently happened to the Israelites. Even though they were God’s people, God didn’t spoil them. Or maybe I should say, because they were God’s people, God didn’t spoil them.

 Now, it’s easy to spoil people because it makes us feel good, and the ones we spoil feel good too – for a little while. But then the bad eating habits lead to health problems, and the lack of discipline leads to behavioral problems. Spoiling spoils people.

 So God didn’t spoil Israel. God was always patient with his people. But when his people made it plain that they were not going to listen, then God would gradually take away blessings until he got their attention. This was the situation in our reading.

 God’s people had neglected God. Which is sort of understandable. Their God had lots of rules about foods they couldn’t eat, the foreign gods told them to eat whatever they liked. I mean, wouldn’t it rankle you if God took away your breakfast bacon and pulled pork. Their God, the God of the Bible, had lots of rules that enforced sex-within-marriage only culture. The foreign gods made fornication part of their religion—have all the fun you like! And the list could go on. All in all, God’s people wanted a god who would let them do what they wanted. So they left their true God and followed the gods of the people around them, gods created in the image of man. So God let his people be oppressed by their next-door neighbors, a tribe called the Philistines.

 After a decade or two, the Israelites cried out to the Lord. One gets the impression they were more tired of the political situation than the religious situation, but God was willing to use a teachable moment. Through his prophet Samuel he said, ***“If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods… and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines… On that day they fasted and there they confessed, “We have sinned against the Lord”*** (3,6). They looked back and remembered.

 Part and parcel of the last week of every year is a look back at the passing year. We remember the most quotable quotes, the biggest sports upsets, politics, celebrity deaths, and more. *Part* of a the *Christian* New Year is a rededication to our God. And part and parcel of the New Year rededication is repentance. When we look back at the year, we see our sins of weakness where we just “couldn’t help ourselves”, sins of ignorance where we “didn’t mean to hurt anyone”, and sins of choice where “we just didn’t care” – we were going to do and get what we wanted no matter what. Of all these sins we must repent. Unless we are truthful with God, and confess our sins to him, he cannot be our God. Let us be honest and confess, as did Israel, ***“We have sinned against the Lord.”***

 Here is the other part of the Christian New Year rededication. Once Israel was finally serious about repenting, ***“While Samuel was sacrificing [their] burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites… The men of Israel rushed out of [the town of] Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen.”***

 Samuel knew human nature, ours and the Israelites’. We can promise to change, but once we get what we want, we go back to our old ways. Samuel didn’t want Israel going back to their old ways. So Samuel set up a stone, probably weighing several hundred pounds or a ton. And every time the Israelites walked down that road from Mizpah, they would see the stone, they could touch the stone, it stood as a witness of the Lord’s faithfulness in the past years, and they would echo Samuel’s words, “Yes, thus far has the Lord helped us.” They would be reminded that their blessings were God’s blessings. That stone had a name, you know. ***“[Samuel] named it Ebenezer.”*** Ebenezer means “rock of help”; the first Ebenezer.

 What are your Ebenezers of 2016: The acceptance letter from the college of your choice? The scar from the appendectomy that preserved a young father’s life? A little grandchild? The church you call your church home? We all have our Ebenezers, real life reminders of God’s blessings. Walk over to those stones of remembrance, touch them, remember God’s goodness to you in this past year.

 Repentance of past sins is good for the new year. Even better is remembering God’s grace and forgiveness. Because once sins are repented of, they are gone. God’s grace in Jesus Christ endures forever. In this new year we have confidence because of Grace Remembered. Amen.

**Grace For Today**

***2 Corinthians 12:7-9***

 *7To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.*

Dear Friends In Christ

 Grace remembered is good. There is not a Christian alive who cannot list many blessings of God in their life. But there is a difference between looking back and looking at the current situation. You look back, and you can see how God used even the “bad” things of life for good. Or even when you can’t see the goodness fully formed, you can start to see its outlines.

 But when you look at today, it is a different thing. We don’t see how any good can come from our current troubles. How can good come from diseases and health conditions we will never 100% recover from? How can good come from bills we can’t pay? How can good come from stressed out relationships that always seem to sink to a lower level? How can good come from realizing personal inadequacies that we have to try to fake through life? Troubles, troubles, troubles.

 Don’t feel too bad. If there is any good news about it, you are not alone. God’s man, the Apostle Paul, wrote, ***“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh.”*** God allowed something to happen to Paul that made life a pain for him. We don’t know what it was, though it seems pretty certain that it was some sort of physical condition because Paul called it a ***“thorn in the flesh.”*** Some Bible scholars think it may have been migraines, or epilepsy, or chronic pain, or near blindness. But we don’t really know. It was, however, a pretty serious condition. This was a man who had nearly been stoned to death, who had been shipwrecked, who had been beaten up by mobs. He was a tough guy, the sort who could cut off his finger with a buzz saw and then sew it back on. But his “thorn in the flesh” was such a problem that he devoted himself to prayer to God about the issue on multiple occasions. “Please God, take this away. It hurts so much. It gets in the way of my work. Dear God, I could be so much a better Christian if you would just take this out of my life.” And he prayed and prayed.

 Do that with the things that trouble you today. Follow Paul’s example. Pray.

 He prayed. The Lord answered. Here it is: ***“[The Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”*** I guess you might call that answer a “No.” But I don’t think that is accurate.

 I remember a boy who had both legs amputated at the knees. It happened when he was just a few months old. And when he got a little older you just wanted to pick up that boy and carry him wherever he wanted. But that wasn’t the answer to his problems. His parents had to learn the right amount of help to give. He obviously needed help. But if the parents gave too much help, the boy would never learn to be a member of society, but only to be babied by society. They had to learn how much help was helpful, and how much help was hurtful. I am guessing that that son did not always agree with his parents.

 And that is what God does with each of us. He has a heart for us, but he also knows that even a man like the Apostle Paul could become arrogant. So God allowed him to be afflicted by some thorn in the flesh. And each of us has our own loads to carry. Some, admittedly, seem heavier than others. But our loving heavenly Father tells us, *“My grace is sufficient for you.”*

 In the now of today, this sentence from God is always true, ***“My grace is sufficient for you.”*** God’s grace is sufficient. He always gives you what you need for this day. Even in the throes of death and suffering, this is true because God’s goal is beyond this life. His goal is to get you to eternity, and his goal is to get as many other people as possible there too!

 As you shoulder your difficulties and look at the difficulties others have, you will find that indeed God’s grace is sufficient for you. He has given you those which you can bear, and as you look at others you will find that you have been spared those which you could not have borne.

 Jesus adds, ***“My power is made perfect in weakness.”*** If you ever go to the Black Hills of South Dakota and visit Wind Cave, you will see something called boxwork. Very few caves of the world have much boxwork. In fact, a park ranger said there is only one other cave like it in Ukraine. Boxwork is a lattice, almost a grid or honeycomb of stone. What happened, so they guess, is that soft rock had cracks in it, and the cracks filled with a kind of calcium that actually made a harder rock in the cracks. Over time, the softer rock wore away, leaving just the hard rock from the cracks, and so you have this boxwork, this honeycomb-like rock formation. It is the weakness in the original rock that let something stronger fill the gaps and remain. Maybe that is as close as we can come to explaining Jesus’ words to Paul, ***“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”***

 Where our weakness is today, you can be sure God will fill it with his strength. He will give us his grace for today that we may live this day to his glory. ***“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”*** Amen.

**Grace for the Coming Year**

***John 21:17-22***

 *17Jesus said [to Peter], “Feed my sheep. 18I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” 19Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!” 20Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”) 21When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?” 22Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.”*

Dear Friends in Our Savior,

 What do these have in common? Fortune cookies, horoscopes, psychics. All are attempts to tell the future. It is interesting that fortune cookies, horoscopes and psychics are all surrounded by a certain amount of shadiness. We don’t take them seriously, or at least not too seriously—and yet we can’t quite leave them alone. We would love to know the future.

 Much of why we want to know the future is that nothing is as frightening as the unknown. Ask the high school senior, who hopes that he or she is pursuing the right path, that the choice between work and college or the choice between degrees will be the right one, that it will result in happiness, not frustration; success, not failure; a place in our world, not being a nobody. Few things cause more anxiety than the unknown future.

 Or maybe… A company of soldiers stands at attention. An officer tells them that they have successfully completed basic training. While still standing in formation, along comes this guy—no one is sure where he came from, he just appears. He has this far-off look in his eyes, like he sees things and knows things no one else knows and sees. And he begins to pick out soldiers, seemingly at random, looking deep into their eyes, speaking calmly. He tells one young man that he will be taken as a prisoner of war. Others he singles out saying that they will die in the line of duty. And when this man speaks, each soldier feels the truth of his words in their bones. This day of joy is turned into a day of fear and worry.

 Maybe, at least sometimes, knowing the future would actually be worse than an unknown future.

 At the end of his three years of training, Jesus our Savior said to his recruit, the Apostle Peter, ***“‘Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.’ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.*** Peter, you will die in the line of duty.”

 So, would you like Jesus to tell you your future?

 Our problem is that even if we agree (and I think most of us would), even if we agree that we are probably better off not knowing our futures, we can’t help ourselves. Since we can’t *know* the future, we *imagine* the future.

 So, what to do about the future?

 Like many, we often walk our dog around the block. She is a very small dog. She doesn’t even tip the scale at ten pounds. But whenever she starts walking, she is under the impression that she is a mighty Alaskan husky tied to a dogsled. She pulls and pulls. But about ¾ of the way through every walk, she starts to hang back a bit. Her curiosity changes into low level stress. He ears stand straight up, she is alert. Coming up are two houses on opposite sides of the street, with big, loud, barking dogs—they are scary to her! She hangs back, a little closer to her master, her source of security. The ferocious dogs may be behind chain link fences, but when you only weigh 9 pounds, you can never be too sure.

 So, what to do about the future? What about Peter’s future when ***“someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go?”*** Jesus’ tells Peter, “Follow me. Stay close to me.” What about your future? Commit yourself to following Jesus. Jesus has promised to walk through our lives with us, if only we will follow his lead!

 In our reading, Peter hears about his future. But then he does the dumbest thing possible. He does just what he did out there in the middle of the Sea of Galilee that time he was walking on water: Peter takes his eyes off Jesus. ***“Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them… When Peter saw him, he asked, ‘Lord, what about him?’***

 Peter did what we all do. When anxiety about the future sets in, he took his eyes off Jesus and looked at someone else. “What about him? Jesus, this doesn’t sound fair. You are telling me I am going to die in your service. Why not him?”

When Peter asked about that other disciple, ***Jesus answered, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.’”***

 Jesus says, “That one? He is none of your business. ***You… follow me.”*** God’s has his plans for each person in this world. And those plans are between him and that person. My concern is God’s plan in *my* life. And when we take our eyes off the people around us and plant our eyes an Jesus, the anxiety of life falls away. When we remember how he has loved us, forgiven us, opened heaven for us, then we follow him into our futures.

 As we face a new year, some of you are looking at it with unbridled optimism. Others, for your own reasons, face the new year with concern, even worry. Whatever your feeling about the future year, listen to Jesus’ invitation, ***“Follow me.”*** And you can be certain that whether you have 75 more new years, or if this one is your last, whether this year will be your financial miracle or disaster, Jesus your Savior is leading you somewhere beyond the disheartening sorrows and the deceitful treasures of this world to another where both disappear. Follow him, keep your eyes on him. Amen.