**Hebrews 13:5-8,14** January 1, 2023

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** New Year’s Day

**Courage for the New Year**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Welcome, 2023! Usually these sermons are based on an assigned reading for the Sunday. There is a reason for that. But today being New Year’s Day, it seemed a good day to invite another Scripture reading on for a guest appearance. That’s why you have that fourth reading in the bulletin. But before I read it in three minutes…

Here’s a trivia point for you. Did you ever wonder why the first month of the year is named January? It is named after the pagan Roman god, Janus. He was thought to preside over beginnings. Janus had two faces: one looking backward, one forward. It embodies our thoughts as we stand at the crossroads of an old year and a new one. You can look back down the road we have walked in the past year, or you can look forward to road unfolding in front of us day by day. In our highlights of 2022 and predictions for 2023, we do both.

You don’t have to be a Christian to do those things, but as a Christian at the crossroads you have a different perspective. Looking back you thank God for past blessings, and you thank him for the strength, peace and grace to get through things that didn’t feel like blessings. Looking forward, you ask for and are certain of God’s blessing, whether the things that await you in 2023 are the good and pleasant or the challenging.

Today’s sermon looks forward into the new year. That is not to say I am unappreciative of all the many good things God has done for me, for you, for us. May we never be unthankful! But today’s Word of God from Hebrews is a forward-looking Word of God.

As we looking into the future, we have some great things planned for 2023! There are weddings. There are babies on the way. Some will start their careers while others will start their retirements—both blessed stages of life in their own ways. [And let’s not forget one of the happiest things about all odd-numbered years: this *isn’t* an election year—Yeah!]

However, some look at the new year with a different eye. Large bills from the past year don’t lapse when a new year begins. Cars with issues don’t magically heal themselves. Some relationship issues seem impervious to the passage of time, refusing to soften with any new year.

This word of God speaks to those who look at a new year with fear and trepidation. It also speaks to those who look at a new year with so much excitement they can’t wait for it to get started!

That said, hear today’s reading:

*Hebrews 13:5 Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” 6So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”*

*7Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. 8Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever… 14Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.*

**I.A.** All in all, this word of God indicates that optimistic Christians, over against pessimistic Christians, are on the right track. The optimists are on the right track ***“because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*** There it is, God’s promise. It is not a wishful thought. It is not positive thinking. It is God’s promise! It is his special promise to his people through faith in Jesus Christ. It reminds us of the promise Jesus Christ himself made to his disciples just before he left them, *“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* That was Jesus’ promise to his disciples as they stepped off the porch into the real world, it is God’s promise to us as we enter the uncharted waters of 2023.

That promise is almost enough right there! But there is also a word of guidance, and this is guidance especially for the optimistic and hopeful. ***“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have.”*** To those who feel like the world is their oyster, there are cautions. Let your strength, your youth, your abilities, your ambition—all of which are God-given blessings—let them not be tools for self-centered living. As you experience God’s blessings and as you strive for more and better, let it not be out of discontent of what God has given to you. Don’t let your ambitions for the new year spring from that root of all evil, ***“the love of money.”*** Money is not evil, but love of money—when money becomes the goal that shapes our principles, that causes us to neglect our obligations, then it is too late. Sin is already running rampant. God has been reduced to a little corner of life. People are growled at for their shortcomings and vices rather than sympathized over for their needs. Love of money is a spiritual disease.

Even if you have not become a heartless robber baron, you might have a love of money. Here is a mistake we often make: the morality of comparison. As long as there is a billionaire out there who has amassed his fortune through questionable means (and there are some of those out there), and as long as there are impoverished people out there who refuse to put in a day of honest work (and there are some of those out there), it is very easy for those of middle class means—which most of us are—to find excuses for our own love of money; to reason, “Well, at least I’m not like \_\_\_\_\_.”

Let us take God’s words to heart as we make our plans for 2023. Ask if your priorities in *acquiring* money/wealth/things put God far down the priority list. Ask if your planned *uses* for money/wealth/things exhibit a self-centeredness, rather than a God-centeredness and concern for neighbor. Is there something you need to adjust either in your schedules or budget, your acquisition or expenditures? Is there self-centeredness you need to repent of? Go to Jesus, for he is the same merciful Savior he was when he walked the earth long ago. He speaks forgiveness to all who sorrow over sin. Then live like forgiven people, people in whom there is no love of money! Yes, be Christians in whom there is no love of money.

**B.** While those optimistic about a new year may be basically right in their trust of God, not everyone is optimistic. There are too many troubles to mention that can make life unbearable. They range from financial to interpersonal to health to mental well-being. These things can weigh a person down with anxiety.

You know how a mother feels when her child is really anxious? Mom wants more than anything to set that child at ease. She will hold that child close, make all kinds of promises (some of which she has no power to keep), all the while playing a game or singing a song or making a treat to get the child’s mind off the worrying details. She cannot stand seeing her child distressed. Nor does our heavenly Father like to see us in that state.

If your outlook at the start of a new year is pessimistic, let this word of God escort you into the coming year: ***“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*** It’s a promise he does have the power to keep. God says: ***“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you,”*** then verse 6 responds, ***“So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”***

How can a saddened, depressed soul speak with such confidence? First it remembers God’s promise. Then it remembers our destination, ***“Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”*** Oh yes! This coming year might just bring financial ruin, loss of health, a tragic accident. Pastors can’t afford to be head-in-the-clouds optimists. We aren’t going to pretend that only the things you want to happen will happen. Yet we remind you: nothing, absolutely nothing, can negate God’s promise, ***“Never will I leave; never will I forsake you.”*** Nothing will ever make an assault on the ***“enduring city… that is to come.”*** Remember those things. Those things don’t end. Pain ends. Sadness ends. 2023 will end. God’s promise will not.

Therefore you can ***“say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.”***

**II.** As we look into the new year, this reading points us in a direction that we maybe did not expect to be pointed. ***“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.”*** Entering a new year, remember those who went before.

Notice, this is not talking about all the people of influence in our lives. This speaks to people who have directed us in Christ. ***“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you…”*** This certainly has in mind preachers and teachers. We are right to also include Christian parents, Sunday School teachers, elders, even organists and people in the congregation who befriended you—you know, people who, even though they were three generations older than you took an interest in your life.***“Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.”***

Thinking of those people… It’s 1978. It’s a tiny dirty bathroom in a filling station in Houston, Texas. It’s a Sunday morning. The parents in a family on vacation escort each of their three kids, in turn, into that bathroom, dress clothes in hand. Those parents are getting their children ready for church on their family vacation. Were the kids embarrassed? I can say “Yes” in the first person! Did I want things to go down like that? “No!” Forty-four years later I hear Hebrews 13, verse 6, ***“Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith”*** and I think of them. They had nothing to be ashamed of as they consistently led us to our Savior. They could hold their heads up, not with Frank Sinatra arrogance saying “I did it my way,” but with godly humility saying, “For the glory of Jesus.” In the new year, ***“Imitate their faith!”***

What are *your* memories of those who spoke the word of God to *you*. What are the heroic moments of faith you witnessed or were part of as your Christian parents, or pastor, or Sunday School teacher led you in faith. Remember those moments, those people. Remember the outcome of their way of life, in the here-and-now and in eternity. Imitate it. Remember how they each pointed to their leader, ***“Christ Jesus [who] is the same yesterday and today and forever.”***

As we leave behind 2022, think about that phrase, ***“Christ Jesus is the same forever.”*** He is not a fad that fades. He will not be outmoded by the next wave of technology. He will not be outsmarted by a new philosophy. The salvation Jesus once won for us is the same one we need today, because even though the fads, technologies and philosophies change, the important stuff does not. Jesus is still the answer, the Savior of us sinners.

At the crossroads of a new year we assess and adjust. Have you ever used a compass? Maybe you know that a compass doesn’t actually point to the north pole. It points to the magnetic north pole. Depending on where you are in the world, that can make a pretty big difference on whether or not you arrive at your destination. If you are going to rely on a compass, you have to adjust your compass (magnetic declination).

Especially on the first day of the new year, when we plot our course to the best of our ability under God’s blessing, this word of God would have us adjust our compasses. First, find confidence in God’s promise: ***“Never will I leave you.”*** Then ask yourself if you are headed in the right direction. ***“Keep your lives free from the love of money.”*** Keep worldly treasures in their place. And ***“Remember [those] who spoke the word of God to you.”*** Are your role models the affluent, the entertaining, the good looking, or are they those who have rooted you in the word of God, people who have your eternal well-being in mind? These are the ways that God would have us adjust our spiritual compasses at the beginning of a new year.

In this new year, be led by these directives. Be confident in God’s promise, ***“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*** Amen.