1 January 2023 St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
The Circumcision and Name of Jesus Vienna, VA

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"Happy New Year?"
Text: Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 2:21; Number 6:22-27

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Happy New Year! Maybe. Maybe it will be happy for you. But maybe not. We hope it will be. We wish it. That the war in Ukraine will end. That our nation's politics will get out of the pig sty and maybe even get something accomplished. That hostile dictators will become a little less hostile. That hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires, earthquakes, tsunamis, pandemics, and things like mass shootings and terrorism might take the year off. That would be nice. Though it's unlikely. What's *more* likely is that there will be more of the same. A new calendar year really changes very little.

So maybe instead of hoping for change - which may or may not come in the new year now before us . . . maybe instead we put our hope in the God who doesn't change. Our God *who is the same yesterday, today, and forever* (Hebrews 13:8). And when things happen in the world and in our lives that cause us sadness or frustrate us, that induce fear or make us wonder if anyone is sane anymore . . . rather than drive us to despair, those things drive us to the one we can count on. The one who is good, works good, and can bring good out of evil. The one who makes promises and keeps them. The one who will one day make not just a year but all things new. That the worse or the harder things get in the world or in your life, the more we live by faith. Not in what we can do, but in what our Lord can do. And will do.

Which is <u>not</u> an excuse to do nothing! As in: My New Year's resolution this year is to do nothing because I'm going to let God handle it all! No . . . God uses people like you and me to work good in this world. So what you do is important. How your work provides for the needs of others. How you care for and provide for your family. How your generosity and friendship helps others up. God wants you not only to not sin, but to do good works, God works, those works through which God works good.

But as you've often heard me say, there are two ditches we don't want to fall into here. To do nothing and think God is going to do everything for you is the one ditch, but the other ditch is equally bad - and that is to think it's all up to me. That if this is really going to be a Happy New Year for me then it will be because I did all the right things, and did them well enough. I kept my resolutions, was a better person, a better parent, I worked harder, I changed, I improved. I did all those things I was supposed to do . . . mostly . . .

or more often than not . . . or more than I used to, at least . . .

All of which isn't bad! It's good to work on yourself and improve. But you're not worth more if you succeed and worth less if you don't. You're not loved by God more if you improve and less if you don't. **You are a baptized child of God.** Which means when your heavenly Father looks at you, He doesn't see a disappointment, someone who has fallen short - again! - or someone He's only going to give one more chance to. Baptized into Christ, having put on Christ means that when your heavenly Father looks at you He sees Christ, He sees His Son, whom He dearly loves. He sees good. He sees new. Now, that's definitely not what we see! But that's why we say in the Creed that *we believe in* a holy Christian Church, a communion of saints, and the forgiveness of sins. So what makes you new is not a New Year or a new effort on your part, but the one who makes all things new by His death and resurrection. You are new because Jesus has made you new.

And part of that was, of all things, *circumcision*. Which really doesn't seem like something to celebrate, does it? It's kind of odd, it's kind of embarrassing. And apart from Jesus it would be this weird ritual, this weird law that had to be done but really doesn't make any sense. Which is, in fact, what happened. Circumcision took on a life of its own and became something that had to be done in order to be saved. It was part of the Law that had to be kept if you wanted to be saved. And so at the time of Paul and the New Testament Church after Jesus, there were some people who were insisting that circumcision still had to be done - that if you wanted to be a Christian, you had to keep the Law of Moses and be circumcised. And this was no small problem in the early church.

So the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians to set things straight about this; about how one is saved. And he used an important word in the verses from that letter that we heard today: ***guardian***. He said ***the law was our* guardian *until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.*** Which does NOT mean that we were saved by the Law until Christ came and now we're saved by faith. Salvation is and has always been by faith alone. **The purpose of the Law was never to save us**. And I'm going to repeat that because it's so important and so often misunderstood: the purpose of the Law - *which includes circumcision* - was NEVER to save us. Because it can't. We can't be saved by what we do, no matter how much or how well you do it. Rather, the Law, Paul says, served as ***our guardian***. That is, our caretaker. To point us to Jesus, ***in order that we might be justified*** - not by ourselves, but ***by faith*** in Him.

This is why I said at the beginning of the sermon today that all the things that happen in our world - the hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires, earthquakes, tsunamis, pandemics, mass shootings, terrorism, all the things that cause us sadness and frustrate us - instead of driving us to despair, should drive us to Jesus. Because all those things are the wordless preaching of the Law. All those things are preaching to us that the world is broken, that we are broken, that we've fallen and we can't get up! We need help. We need a Saviour.

That's the purpose of the Law. Not to make us good by what we do, but to make us good by turning us, driving us to God and what *He* does for us. That was the purpose of all the sacrifices, the Tabernacle, the Temple, the priests, and all those laws. And it was what circumcision was to do, too. That was a very graphic, very vivid reminder that God had made a promise to send a Saviour who would be a descendant, one of the seed of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. So circumcision was never meant to be a purely physical act, but a faith act. A put-your-faith-in-God-and-His-promises act.

Until that promise of a Saviour was fulfilled. *Until* Jesus came and did what we could never do - lead a perfect life, and then die in atonement for our sins. And once He did, you didn't need the sacrifices anymore. You didn't need the Temple anymore. You didn't need the Levitical priesthood anymore. And you didn't need circumcision anymore. We didn't need those guardians anymore.

But we still need Jesus! We always need Jesus. So just as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and all Old Testament believers lived by faith in God's promise to send a Saviour, so we New Testament believers live by faith in the Saviour God did send, His Son. Promise fulfilled. His Son who was born for you, then circumcised on the eighth day for you, lived for you, was baptized for you, died for you, rose for you, and ascended for you. Who did *everything* for you, that you might be new. Forgiven. A child of God. Dearly loved. With hope, and a future, and confidence. No matter what year it is, or what time in the year it is. Jesus is the same - the same Saviour for you - yesterday, today, and forever.

So now that the sign of circumcision and the rest of the Mosaic Law has been gloriously and graciously fulfilled for us in Jesus, a new sign has been given to us: **baptism**. In his letter to the Colossian Christians, Paul calls baptism *a circumcision made without hands, the circumcision of Christ* (Colossians 2:11). And in his letter to the Romans he calls circumcision *a matter of the heart* (Romans 2:29). Which is what Moses himself had said, too! That circumcision was not just an outward thing, but that *the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring* (Deuteronomy 30:6). That is, cut away the hardness and sinfulness of our hearts. To give us new hearts, loving hearts, godly hearts.

So everytime you see that font, or walk by that font, or make the sign of the cross, or remember that you are baptized, just as circumcision pointed the faith of Israel to their promised Messiah and all that God promised to do for them in Him, so baptism points our faith to Jesus and all that He has done for us. To remember and rely on not what you have done or do, but to remember and rely on Jesus and all that He has done *for you*. That He has made you new. And given you not merely a New Year, but a new - and eternal - life.

That's who you are. Your identity. In a world searching for identity and making up new

identities every day, you don't need to. You know who you are: **a baptized child of God.** In a world searching and yearning for meaning, for relevance, for life, for something that will last, you already have all that. **You are a baptized child of God.** And in a world hungering and thirsting but they really don't know what for, you are fed and satisfied by the Body and Blood of your Jesus here. All that you need, you have. And all that you will need has been promised to you.

And whatever this New Year of 2023 holds for you, for us, and for the world, nothing can change that. Which, it seems to me, is a pretty good way to start a New Year. Remember who you <u>are</u> and what you <u>have</u>. That you <u>are</u> a child of God, and <u>have</u> his love, forgiveness, and life. And this too: His Name. He put His Name on you. Because you are precious to Him. That's what we do, isn't it? We put our name on the things we don't want to lose. A wife takes her husband's name because he is precious to her, and he gives it to her because she is precious to him. Children are given the name of their parents because they are precious new additions to that family. So God has given His Name to you. He put it on you in your baptism, and we hear it at the end of the Divine Service every week. God commanded Aaron to put His Name on His people, to bless them with His Name. And you have been so blessed. Don't underestimate that, what a precious gift that is. To know who you are in a world with spiritual amnesia. To know what you have in a world always striving for what doesn't last. Remember that you are baptized, the circumcision of Christ made without hands.Remember that you bear God's Namen you are His. So that whether or not you have a *Happy* New Year, you <u>will</u> have a blessed one.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.