

31 December 2003
New Years Eve

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Confidence of Faith”

Text: Romans 8:31-39

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

The verses from Romans assigned for this night are the favorite verses of many people. They provide a great deal of comfort, and assurance, and confidence. ***“If God is for us, who can be against us?”*** . . . ***“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”*** And the answer is: nothing. As Christians, we belong to Christ for we have been baptized into Christ, and we know that in Him, come what may, we are secure.

Those are especially good words to hear on a night like tonight – New Year’s Eve. A night when we look back at what has transpired this past year, the ups and downs, the highs and lows, the joys and tragedies; and as we look in anticipation to next year, the New Year, and what might happen, both expected and unexpected. A night like tonight can provide a sense of relief – that another year has passed and we made it through! But it might also provide a sense of anxiety – for we know not what the future holds.

And so it is good to hear once again where our confidence lies. It is not in what **we** are able to do or accomplish. It is not in the powers and people of this world. It is rather in the One who has overcome the world in His death and resurrection. (1 John 4:4) It is in the One who has conquered all things by His might. (Rev. 5:5) It is in the One who holds us in His hand, which He promised no one can snatch us out of. (John 10:27) It is in the One who is our Saviour and our Lord. The One whom all the passing years are named after and lived under: *anno domini* – the year of our Lord. And this Lord, the Maker of Heaven and earth, who was and is and is to come, is the One whose birth in human flesh we celebrated one week ago tonight. This One named Jesus, so named, for ***“He will save His people from their sins.”***

For it is our sin that is the greatest threat to you and me. It is not terrorism, or violence, or crime, or disaster. Those things do come upon us, but the worst they can do is take our life. But for those who belong to Christ, who have been baptized into Christ, the One who conquered death and the grave, this is really no threat at all. The end of our life is simply the beginning of eternity. . . . But sin is a different matter. Sin can not only

separate us from God here on earth, but also for eternity. And so to know that we have been saved from our sins; that we have the forgiveness of our sins; that the barrier of sin that once separated you and I from our Heavenly Father has been smashed and removed – that is to know and be sure that we are safe and secure. That there truly is now nothing that can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. It may be exciting to watch the ball drop in Times Square and see the ending of another year, but more thrilling is to know that the foot of our Saviour has dropped upon the serpent’s head, and to know the ending of his reign over us!

That salvation is why St. Paul could write the words that he did in Romans, that we heard again tonight. ***“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?”*** St. Paul experienced all of those things! Some, multiple times! And also much more. And, he knows that these things are also going to happen to all Christians, *us included*. But they are of no real consequence, for the Christian. For the Christian who has forgiveness has everything.

But Paul does not want us to think that therefore the Christian life is going to be easy, even with all the hopes we have for the New Year. In fact, it is just the opposite. And to demonstrate this fact, and that this is nothing new or novel from Paul, right after these words, he inserts a quotation from Psalm 44 – a Psalm written when God’s people were experiencing some pretty tough times. And those words say: ***“For your sake”*** – because we belong to you, O God – ***“we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*** And the psalmist makes it clear – this is not happening because the people have forgotten God, or have because they turned to worship false gods. If they had, it would be understandable. But this is happening to the faithful precisely *because they are God’s people*. Why? **Because that is the way of the cross.** Listen to what Martin Luther wrote about this, in a letter to the Elector at a particularly precarious political time:

“It does no harm that [you] should be in the midst of danger because of this. Our Lord Christ is powerful enough, [and he] can easily find ways and means [to see] that such danger will do nothing to [you]; he can very well nullify the plans of the ungodly sovereigns. . . . In addition, Christ tries us (as is right and necessary) through this [danger, to see] whether or not we, too, take his word seriously and uphold it as firm truth. For if we wish to be Christians and have life eternal in the world to come, then we cannot [in this world] be better off than our Lord himself and all his saints were and still are. Christ’s cross must always be carried; the world does not want to carry it, but wants to place it on others; but we Christians have to carry it so that it does not lie around without an owner, or is good for nothing.” (LW vol. 49, 248)

And think of the crosses that the saints of old had to bear. The saints of the Old Testament, of the New Testament, of the early church, of the Reformation, of even just a generation or two ago. But listen to what St. Paul writes about this: ***“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”*** And note carefully what Paul said there: in all these things. In the *midst* of all these things. Not in *avoiding* all these things, but exactly in all these things, we are not defeated, but are conquerors through Christ Jesus. Or as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, in all these things, we are **blessed**. **Blessed** are those who mourn, who are persecuted, who hunger and thirst for righteousness. . . . Now I will grant you that it doesn't always feel like it! And it very often feels like we are the vanquished, not the conquerors! But who are we going to believe? Who are we going to rely on? Will we let **the world** tell us what it is to be blessed or not? Will we let our **feelings** dictate to us what is good and what is not? It is not the world that dictates what is and what isn't. It is not Satan and his minions who determine what will be. It is not what we feel that determines what is true and what is false. No, it is our Father. What He says happens. What He says is true. Despite appearances. Despite what we may feel or not feel. Despite the opinion of the world. It is our Father, who sent His Son to bear the cross. It is our Father, who sends His sons and daughters crosses to bear still today. It is our Father, who also promised that these crosses would not be too much for us to bear, but that they would, in fact, be blessings. . . . So who are we going to believe?

Mary and Joseph believed the Word of the Lord, spoken to them by the angel Gabriel. The world told them they were cursed, and perhaps their own feelings told them the same. But faith believed the Word and the blessing. And so Mary considers herself blessed.

And so too you and I. We believe the Word of the Lord, spoken to us by the servants and messengers of the Lord, which tells us that our sins are forgiven. When ***“tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword”*** come upon us, the world and our feelings tell us we are cursed, that we've done something wrong, that we are being punished by God. But faith believes the Word and the blessing. We are forgiven. We are blessed. We are baptized children of God. And so baptized into Christ, we can not only face the New Year, but every day, with great confidence. We don't have to *hope* that next year will be better than this year. We don't have to resolve to make it better. We need only cling to His Word and His promises, and we have everything. We are conquerors in Him who conquered sin and death. And so we say with St. Paul, ***“I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

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