

Sermon for December 31, 2015 – New Year’s Eve

2 Chronicles 15:2b (NASB)

The LORD is with you when you are with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you.

I don’t know about you, but whenever I start a new year, new plans and worries fill my mind. My plans deal with all the things I would like to accomplish – both personally and professionally. My worries mostly stem from the ever increasing moral decay of our society. What spiritual challenges will we face in the new year? Will we have the strength to overcome them?

As our minds fill with plans and worries, how important and comforting it is to hear our devotion text for this evening. It contains both a promise and a warning that we would do well to meditate on – not just this evening, but throughout the year.

Let us, therefore, consider how the warning and promise God gave king Asaph applies to us, under the theme: **God’s covenant:** 1) With King Asa 2) With You

Part One: God’s covenant with Asa

Before we dig into our text, I want to talk about King Asa and the important events leading up to it. Asa was the great grandson of King Solomon. Now, whenever we hear of King Solomon, we think of the Sunday School stories we learned about him: how God gave him more wisdom than anyone who has ever lived, the great temple he built for the LORD and the peace and prosperity of his reign.

What you might not know, however, is that Solomon – later on in his life – let his many wives lead him into idolatry. He built temples and altars to foreign gods – and his people started worshiping them. If it were not for God’s promise to David, the LORD probably would have taken the kingdom away from Solomon. Instead, he allowed it to split under the reign of his son Rehoboam.

The Bible records that Rehoboam did nothing to stop the idolatry his father allowed and neither did his son Abijah. God’s people continued forsaking him, so the LORD removed his protective hand from them – allowing the King of Egypt to come all the way up to Jerusalem. He carried away many of the golden treasures King Solomon had made for both the temple and his palace.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: already here we see God doing exactly what He warned he would do in our devotion text: if you forsake Him, He will forsake you. Consider all the wonderful blessing the Jews had: they were God’s chosen people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God. And yet they traded all this so that they could be more like their neighbors, worshipping the gods they worshiped. They forsook the LORD, so the LORD forsook them - demonstrating how, without his protection, they would be lost, distressed and assimilated into the hopelessness of the world.

Take warning from this, brothers and sisters in Christ. Yes, the LORD is loving and forgiving, but he is also holy and just. “*Do not be deceived,*” the Scriptures say, “*God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.*” (Gal 6:7 NASB). The LORD will not allow his grace to be used as a license for sin.

Thankfully the LORD did not abandon his people completely. He remembered his promise to David, and allowed Asa, the son of Abijah, to become king. The Bible describes his reign in this way: *Asa did good and right in the sight of the LORD his God,³ for he removed the foreign altars and high places, tore down the sacred pillars, cut down the Asherim,⁴ and commanded Judah to seek the LORD God of their fathers and to observe the law and the commandment.⁵ He also removed the high places and the incense altars from all the cities of Judah.* (2Ch 14:2-5 NASB)

Even though previous kings had forsaken the LORD, Asa sought the LORD with his whole heart. And guess what happened? The LORD allowed himself to be found! He was happy with Asa – using him to reform the ways of his people

But that doesn't mean that everything was smooth sailing for Asa. No, one of the first things the LORD did is put Asa's faith to the test – to see if He would trust him with his whole heart and, through that faith, lead the people of Judah back to their God.

Here's the situation: an army composed of 1 million soldiers marched against Judah - that's far more than the 300,000 soldiers Asa had and they were far better equipped as well. What would Asa do? Try to make a treaty with them or the godless nations around them? No, Asa went out to meet them – demonstrating his confidence in the LORD's care and protection. Listen to his "prebattle" prayer: *"LORD, there is no one besides You to help in the battle between the powerful and those who have no strength; so help us, O LORD our God, for we trust in You, and in Your name have come against this multitude. O LORD, You are our God; let not man prevail against You."*¹² *So the LORD routed the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians fled.* (2Ch 14:11-12 NASB)

It was right after this great victory that the LORD sent the prophet Azariah to encourage Asa with the words of our text: *"Listen to me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: the LORD is with you when you are with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you."*

The Bible tells us that this warning and promise encouraged Asa. He worked all the harder at removing the idolatry his forefathers allowed. He led Judah to enter into a new covenant with the LORD in which they promised to seek the LORD with all their heart and soul. And guess what happened? The LORD blessed his reign with peace.

Part Two: God's covenant with you.

Now, many of you might be wondering what all this history has to do with us as we face a new year. The answer is: much, because the promise God gave Asa, he has also given us.

Just as the LORD graciously chose Israel to be his people, so also the LORD has graciously chosen us – washing us clean from all sin and marking us as his own through the waters of Baptism. St. Peter describes us in this way: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* (1Pe 2:9-10 NIV84)

Throughout Scripture the refrain is repeated again and again: God is with us. He is with every believer – having called, gathered and enlightened us through his means of grace. We are the LORD's people every bit as much as Israel and Judah of old. The LORD has given us His Word and sacraments as a way to grow

in our knowledge and faith in Him. We don't have to be afraid of anything. The Lord is with us – forgiving our sin and entrusting us with the privilege of witnessing his saving name to all the earth.

If God is with us, let us then remain with him because, as our sermon text states: *The LORD is with you when you are with Him.* How are we to understand these words? Does God mean to say that he is only with us if we come to him first? No, that can't be the case for two reasons: 1) The Bible is clear that we could never come to God or believe in him on our own – because we, by nature, are so utterly corrupt and helpless. 2) The Bible is also clear that, just as the LORD chose Israel when they sought him not, so also the LORD has graciously chosen us to be his own people – even when we were lost in sin.

Well, then, how are we to understand our text? I think my little Emily can serve as a good example.

When we walk together in a crowded shop, I ask her to hold my hand so that I can guide her and keep her safe. She willingly does this but, after a while, she gets antsy. She sees things that grab her attention and soon pursues them – and, in so doing, leaves my protective presence.

We are all like this, aren't we? God the Father tells us to stay close to him, and at first we are willing to do so – holding on tightly to him through our use of His Word and Sacraments. But then, something in the world grabs our attention. We become enamored with it – all but forgetting our heavenly Father's words to stay close to him. Soon we find ourselves pursuing those things and – without actually realizing it – leaving the presence of our heavenly Father. This is what happened in Judah in later days of Solomon and Rehoboam; and it can just as easily happen to us!

This is why the LORD encourages us to remain in his presence – listening to his warnings and relying on his promises. He will protect us from all the great enemies that threaten us – just as he protected Judah from the million-man army that threatened them. He will help us navigate through the moral decay that is affecting our country as many more people turn away from him to pursue the gods of this world. As we put our hand of faith in his, we are assured that He will safely guide us through an uncertain future – safely delivering us home to himself in heaven.

But, what if we have let go of him? What if we, like a child in a crowded mall, ran away from our Father and have just come to realize that we are apart from him and lost?

Well, don't be like Judah, who continued to run away from him. Instead, repent of your sin and turn back to him, for our sermon text promises *if you seek Him, He will let you find Him.*

God does not hide himself from those who seek him. No, he is constantly calling us to meet him in the place where He can always be found. And where is that? In His Word and Sacraments. It is through these means that God promises to come into contact with us. More than that, He promises to live in and with us as we use these means of Grace to grow in our knowledge and faith of him. He is with us - allowing himself to be found in His Word. And, as we remain with Him, God promises to bless us – just as he blessed Asa. As we submit our plans to him, he will guide them to bring glory to his name. He will also protect us from the world – ever moving us to reform our hearts in His Gospel so that we may continue to pursue him with our whole heart and soul.

And so, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as you enter into a new year, remember the warning and promise God made with you in Christ. Let it be your guide – not only through this coming year, but your entire life: *The LORD is with you when you are with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you.*

And so we pray: “Dear Jesus, send me your Spirit that I may never forsake you. Keep me in grace by keeping me in your Word that I might always remain with you and you remain with me – under your protective care and glorifying your name. Amen”