

Devotion for December 31, 2014 – New Year’s Eve

Exodus 33:14

The Lord replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.

How could they do it? How could Israel, just forty days after hearing God’s thundering voice from Mt. Sinai build and worship a golden calf? What possible reason could there be for this idolatry? Just think: within the 12 months leading up to Mount Sinai, the Israelites experienced only love from the LORD. They saw His gracious, saving power expressed through the 10 plagues on Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, water from a rock, and the miraculous manna that fell from heaven! How could they turn from their faithful God so quickly?

My answer to that question is, “They could do it the same way we do when, shortly after Church, we might find ourselves gossiping about someone, lashing out in anger at our spouse, or indulging in entertainment that is less than God-pleasing.”

“But,” someone might protest, “the sin of the Israelites was different. After hearing God’s voice at Sinai, they blatantly disregarded God’s command and worshipped an idol right in front of the Lord.”

But how is that any different, I ask you, than hearing God’s Word and being united with Christ in the LORD’s Supper (something far superior than just seeing and hearing God at Sinai) and then – maybe hours or even minutes after worship - doing the very things God’s Word tells us not to do?

Yes – Israel’s sin at Sinai was horrible; but God did not have it recorded so that we could sit in judgment over them, rather that we might know how corrupt human nature has become because of sin. You see, the same evil nature that led the Israelites to build and worship a golden calf is inside every person on this earth – including you and me. It moves us to gossip, lust, hate, be lazy and disrespectful, avoid worship, find pleasure in things we ought to avoid, etc. . . . When we truly take time to meditate on God’s law - comparing our thoughts and actions with the Ten Commandments – it doesn’t take long for us (if we are honest with ourselves) to see that our sinful natures are just as corrupt as the Israelites’. This should move us to pray: “Lord have mercy on me, a sinner.”

We are at the brink of a new year. Just as the LORD lovingly and faithfully led the Israelites to Sinai, so the LORD has faithfully and lovingly led us to where we are today.

But just as Israel had to look back with shame on their past sins and unfaithfulness, don’t we also? Who of us can honestly claim perfection? What reason have we given the LORD to continue being our God? The honest answer is: none. So if we, in and of ourselves, can offer God no good reason to be our God, how can we be certain that the LORD will continue to forgive our sins and be our God?

The Israelites were asking themselves these questions right before our sermon text. You see, *The Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.* (Exodus 32:35). He told the Israelites to leave mount Sinai. He said that He would give them what he promised Abraham, but He himself would not go with them – lest He destroy them because of their unfaithfulness.

When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn (Exodus 32:4). In other words, they realized their sins and repented. Would God leave them? Would He merely send an angel to give them the land He promised, but then cease to be their God? They certainly didn't deserve His forgiveness but, trusting in God's grace, they sought it anyway. Moses pleaded for Israel – not pointing to their good deeds and faithfulness, but to the LORD's own gracious promise.

And do you know what? The LORD forgave Israel their sin. He told Moses.

“My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.

Oh, what joy and relief this was for Israel. They didn't have to face the rest of their desert journey alone. The LORD would go with them – making his presence known with a pillar of cloud by day and fire at night. He would continue to protect his people from all harm and grant them their daily bread. The Lord would shepherd them through the harsh Sinai wilderness and give them the rest he promised them in their own land. Most wonderful of all: the LORD would continue to be their God, and they would continue to be His people.

Brothers and sisters in Christ – when we look over this past year, let us note our failings and repent. Like the Israelites we, in our own way, have provoked the LORD's anger through our own unfaithfulness. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and, because of this, deserve his eternal wrath and punishment. So where does that leave us? At the foot of the cross - not only confessing our sins, but also trusting in God's mercy to forgive us for Christ's sake.

And why should we be confident that the LORD won't forsake us because of our sins? Because, as we look back at this past year, we also see God's grace through it all – a grace that fed, clothed, and protected us from great harm, and continually called us to Himself through the Gospel. The LORD has most certainly been faithful to us in the past; and He promises to be faithful to us in the future as well.

Like the Israelites – journeying through the desert to Canaan, we too are on a journey through the wilderness of this world – ever walking toward the Promised Land of heaven. We don't know how long our journey will be or where it will lead, but we can be certain that it will be filled with trials and dangers. If God were to abandon us on this journey, we would never make it.

But what the LORD said to Moses he says to us as well:

“My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.

But how do we know that the LORD will continue to go with us? The Israelites had the pillar of cloud and fire to reassure them. What signs has God given us?

He has given us His Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Jesus promised, “*Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.*” (Matthew 18:19) Our gathering around His Word is a sign that He is with us. In the blessed Sacrament of Holy Communion, Christ unites us with himself – giving us his true body and true blood to eat and drink - thereby reminding us of his sacrifice for our sins. The LORD has also poured out His Holy Spirit on us in baptism – sealing us as His own. He tells us that our very bodies are His Holy temple. And who can forget Jesus promise at his ascension: “*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*” (Matthew 28:20)

Yes, the LORD is most certainly with us. His Word and Sacraments are the visible signs of His presence. And since He is with us, we don’t have to be afraid of what the future may hold. He tells us: *do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? . . . The pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* (Matthew 6:25,32-33).

Because the LORD is with us, we don’t have to be afraid of how our spiritual enemies might attack us, like Israel’s enemies attacked them in the desert. As the LORD defended his people, so He will fight for us – so much so that we can say with St. Paul: *The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.* (2 Timothy 4:9)

And if we face pain, sickness or death, we can be confident that the LORD stands beside us to give us the strength to endure, as St. Paul writes: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.* (Romans 8:26) And again: *we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* (Romans 8:28)

And when our last hour comes - when we come to the edge of the proverbial Jordan, ready to cross into the promised land of heaven - we can confess with David: *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me your rod and your staff, they comfort me . . . and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever* (Psalm 23:4,6)

Even if we are faithless, the LORD continues to be faithful to us. When we sin, he calls us to repentance – severely warning us because we are straying from His presence. And when we repent, he forgives us for Christ’s sake and reassuring us by saying:

“My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.

Let us then, brothers and sisters in Christ, rejoice in our great God and also in the eternal rest He has prepared for us through his life, death and resurrection. Look forward to the day he will come to take us to be with him in His father’s house forever. And in mean time? Let this

wonderful promise guide you through out the New Year – unafraid to faithfully follow him.
Why? Because the LORD himself is with you, and He will give you rest.