

Dear Fellow Redeemed by the blood of God's own Son,

This is the first Sunday of the new church year. The old year is past, the new year lies before us. We are starting over, looking ahead. Although some things will stay the same, there will be changes in the world and in our lives, some of these changes may be dramatic. Shall we not therefore pray with the Christian hymn writer: "Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou who changest not, abide with me"? But how can our Lord abide with us, if He has not already been with us and is still willing to go with us into the new year? Increasingly, in our world of change and decay, we hear that "religions" evolve as man searches for God. Many intellectuals think that the Christian faith has evolved over thousands of years because of man's desire, man's invention.

This is surely true of the many heathen and false religions of the world. But we are wise enough to know that we have not "invented" the LORD, our God. We may not be "intellectuals" by the world's standards, but we have been made "wise unto salvation" through the Holy Scriptures (2Tim. 3:15-16). We know that as He has been with us, OUR LORD COMES GLADLY WITH HIS GRACE IN THE NEW YEAR!

### I.

The Gospel is His to proclaim! These prophetic verses were fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Matthew 3 tells us that He was "**anointed**" with the Holy Spirit at His baptism. When He returned to Nazareth as a full-fledged Rabbi or teacher, He stood up to read from the Scriptures as He had done before. But He did not choose to read from the Law of Moses. Instead, Jesus chose to read this very glad Gospel text from the prophet Isaiah. When He had finished, He closed the Book and sat down. Then, with all eyes fixed on Him, Jesus said: "**Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**" (Luke 4:16-21)

Those who saw and heard Him were astounded to say the least! For their eyes saw the son of Joseph, one of their little city's sons. But their ears heard Him say that "**the Spirit of the Lord God was upon HIM, because the LORD had appointed HIM to proclaim "good tidings"!**

The Good News He proclaims is His Gospel because He is Himself the eternal Word of God. Not only that, but He had been **anointed** by the Holy Spirit at His Baptism, and "**the LORD,**" His Father in heaven had "**appointed**" Him to proclaim His Gospel. Isaiah refers to all three persons

of the Holy Trinity!

Many preachers come on their own. They claim to have their own special anointing and appointing that others do not have. Then they go on to proclaim their own words, which place even more burdens on sinful mankind. The words of Jesus were His own! Jesus does not say through Isaiah that He comes to re-establish the earthly kingdom of David or any political kingdom in this world. Isaiah says that He has come to **“preach,” “proclaim,” and comfort.”** Not only did Jesus come to give Himself into death for our sins, as Isaiah has already said in chapter 53, but our Lord has come to preach and proclaim His Gospel clearly.

What is the nature of the Good News He brings? He preaches **“good tidings”** to those who are **“poor”** in spirit. He bandages broken-hearted sinners with His message of forgiveness, relieving the burden of the guilty conscience. He proclaims **spiritual “liberty”** to sinners bound in the dungeon of their own depravity and death, releasing them from Satan’s prison.

Everyone needs to hear the Good News Jesus proclaims. Our lives are often filled with misery and trouble. Our loved ones suffer pain and die. Sometimes those we love desert us. We suffer from the bitterness of a spouse, or the harsh criticism of others. We fall to greed, jealousy, pride, lust, hatred, and outbursts of anger. At the end of life comes death.

But our LORD, does not want anyone to be left to all this! He comes **“to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn.”** The words, “the acceptable year of the LORD,” or “the Lord’s year of grace” comes from the law of the “Year of Jubilee” in O.T. Israel. In that year, property that had been sold was returned to the original owner. Debts were forgiven, and those who had been enslaved to pay off their debts were released.

So too, in the coming church year, our faithful Savior God, promises a new year of His Gospel-grace in terms of forgiveness, peace, and restored life in Him. The Lord’s grace extends for a year, His **“vengeance”** for a **“day.”** Clearly, Jesus wants to be known more for His gracious favor than for His vengeance, He immediately adds **“to comfort all who mourn.”**

But woe unto those who refuse and despise God’s mercy in His time of grace! There will be vengeance and judgment for them! Therefore we will want to receive His grace and spiritual gifts in the year that lies before us. We will not neglect or despise the Gospel He would gladly proclaim to

us for our comfort and salvation.

## II.

**For The Gifts are His to Exchange!** – the effect of His message in all who receive it by humble faith is given in the first part of v. 3. How happy we will be this Christmas if we can replace someone's old and worn out clothing with something new and needed. Even greater is the joy we feel whenever we are able to replace someone's sorrow with joy, or replace their despair with hope! But Jesus comes in the new year to **"To console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."**

Those who "mourn in Zion," are the believing children of God, who truly feel the oppressive burden of their sins and are filled with sorrow because of them. But Jesus comes to make a wonderful exchange! He comes to replace our ashes with His beauty, our mourning with the anointing of His joy, and our heavy spirits with a garment of praise! Our Lord knows when tears overflow our hearts and eyes, or when our lives seem colorless and sad because of our sins.

He comes in the new year to replace it all with the Gifts of His grace and love in the Gospel. The **"Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes" it!** (Rom. 1:16) Jesus promises to work through this Gospel in our hearts, in the coming year, so that we may have His comfort, joy, and strong spirit.

But let us come to hear the Good News Jesus gladly proclaims to us in the new year. For "only those who are sick need a doctor (Mt. 9:12); only the sheep that is lost is looked for (Lk. 15:4); only the captive is freed (Lk. 4:18); only the poor man is made rich; only the weak is made strong; only the humble may be lifted up; only those who are empty may be filled."

Therefore let us say to God in the new year, as Luther did: "How gladly are we empty, so that **You** may fill us! Gladly am I weak that **Your** strength may dwell in me! Gladly am I foolish, so that **You** may be my wisdom! Gladly am I unrighteous, so that **You** may be my Righteousness." (What Luther Says, para. 2097)

## III.

Now finally, why is the Gospel Christ's to proclaim in the new year? Why are the Gifts His to exchange? Isaiah answers: **"That they" – the Lord's believing people – "may be called trees of righteousness, the**

**planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified."** Our Lord's glad proclamation of His Gospel brings about the glory that is His to receive.

Why are the Lord's believing people left here on earth, after their baptism or when they come to faith in their Savior? Why doesn't our Lord instantly pluck us up from the tired soil of this earth to heaven's eternal life? Do we plant the sapling oak tree and then put it up again before it can become a mighty oak, share its acorns with the animals and display its fall colors? So also our LORD leaves most of His spiritual "plantings" on earth to grow up in Him. He wants them to become strong and beautiful "trees of righteousness" that show the strength and beauty of His love for them in their humble faith and love toward others.

Some of us are little seedlings, some are saplings, and some are strong oaks. But our LORD comes gladly with His Grace in the New year, because He has already made us His planting. He desires to make us stronger, more fruitful, and more beautiful trees by the power of His Gospel.

If the azalea, the crepe myrtle, and the mighty oak bring glory to their Creator the longer they sit in His soil and receive His sun and rain, shall we not bring far more glory to our Savior as we sit in His Word of His grace and forgiveness, receive the Light of God's Son, and His water of Life? May our Lord Jesus make it happen according to His promise in the new year of His grace, for His is the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.