

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

Pastor Mark Gartner

Sermon for New Year's Eve and Day – December 31st, 2012 and January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013

### **Isaiah 51:1-6**

<sup>1</sup> "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; <sup>2</sup> look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many.

<sup>3</sup> The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing. <sup>4</sup> "Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. <sup>5</sup> My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.

<sup>6</sup> Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

When I think about the new year, I think many of us would want our future to look like a straight railroad track on the open prairie. No surprises. Clear as far as I would care to look. But in reality the future is more like a road going around a corner in the fog. We don't know what's around the bend. It is all kind of foggy. It is that uncertainty about the future that can make us hesitant to enter a new year.

But you know where we can learn some valuable lessons – from our children. For the most part children aren't too worried about what is going to happen next year. They aren't worried about the economy or job market. They aren't worried about their retirement funds or savings account or the fiscal cliff. They aren't worried about many of the things that we as adults worry about. I know what you are all thinking. They aren't worried because they don't understand all these things. While there is some truth to the fact that they don't understand all the things in life, I think it would be safe to say that they get the big picture. They just want to feel safe and secure. They just want a good meal and a soft bed. They just want to feel loved by their parents.

While this might sound very idealistic or just downright unrealistic, we as children of God need to realize that life is good. When Jesus is in our hearts and God's blessings of grace and mercy abound in our hearts and lives, what is there to worry about? This may not seem like a deep and philosophical way of looking at things, but it is the answer that we as God's children can rely on as we look back at one year drawing to a close and wait with eager expectation for another year of God's grace as we begin another year. The only reason we can have this kind of attitude is because we know and believe that our God is faithful. That is our theme for today and really it is our theme for every day of our lives. Our text invites us to look around to:

### **Theme: See God's Faithful Hand!**

- 1. Look back to see God's faithfulness in 2012.**
- 2. Look ahead to see God's faithfulness in 2013.**

Where should we look first? The first two verses of this text invite us to look back. "**Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; <sup>2</sup> look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and**

**made him many.”** The Lord is speaking through the prophet Isaiah. He says, “Look back.” Look back at the rock Abraham and the dry cistern Sarah. God had promised to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son through whom all nations on earth would be blessed. But ten years passed and nothing happened. As far as having a child, Abraham was a rock without life and Sarah was a water tank without water.

As I look back at Abraham I think especially of Genesis 14 and 15. It would seem that Abraham had everything at the end of chapter 14. The Lord had just given him a great victory over the five kings who had taken Lot captive. He had power, wealth, and prestige. Yet at this “high point” in Abraham’s life, he was afraid he had nothing. Listen to his lament in Genesis 15:2,3: **“O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus. You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”** Isn’t that the way it often is with us? Others might look at our lives and say, “They have everything.” But we see something missing. There is a sense of hopelessness like Abraham felt. But look back and see what God did for Abraham. **“When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many.”** The Lord multiplied one into many. Even today, we who are of the faith of Abraham, are called children of Abraham (Romans 4).

Isn’t this the way to look at the past and then face the future? The first place to look is to look back like you do when you are rowing a boat. You are going forward, but you look backward. Look back and see that our God was faithful in the past. He was faithful to Abraham. And we are celebrating God’s faithfulness this Christmas season. God was faithful to his promise to send his Son into the world. God was faithful to his promise that he would be born of a virgin. God was faithful to his promise that he would be born in Bethlehem. Look back and see God’s faithfulness in the past. This gives us confidence to look forward to see God’s faithfulness in the future.

Let’s look at verse 3: **“The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.”** Who is “Zion” who will be comforted? Zion was the original hill upon which Jerusalem was built. So the names Zion and Jerusalem became almost interchangeable. But there is something more we need to understand. Jerusalem was the center of worship. The temple was there. So when people said, “Let’s go up to Jerusalem,” it is like you and I saying, “Let’s go to church.” Ultimately this reference to Zion is a reference to the Church of both the Old and New Testaments.

Old Testament Zion was in ruins. Isaiah wrote to the generation that witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Lord’s temple at the hands of the Babylonians. They saw the city in ruins. The New Testament Zion, which is God’s church today, may also seem in ruins. 1) There are divisions within the congregation. 2) People are demanding their rights. 3) People are living together outside of marriage. 4) Others are using “forgiveness” as a license to indulge their sinful nature in every form of illicit sexual “pleasure.” 5) Still others are grumbling about what long standing customs they have had to give up to reach the culture around them.

Do you know where I got that list of sins and troubles within the church? I’m not exposing our congregation’s dirty laundry. I got that list from the troubles in the congregation in Corinth. Read 1 Corinthians and you’ll see them all. But the list could be applied to Christian churches to this day. With all these problems, it would seem the New Testament Zion is also in ruins. Yes, 2013 will be a year when Satan will again seek to make a ruin of every Christian congregation and every Christian household, and every single Christian. But the God who was faithful in the past — who did the impossible in bringing many nations out of that one man Abraham, will also be faithful to his promises to us.

Our God promises, **“I will rebuild her ruins. I will make her deserts like Eden. Joy and gladness will be found in her.”** God rebuilt the ruins of Old Testament Zion. And with the coming of our Savior this New Testament Zion is also rebuilt. Joy and gladness is present even in the midst of troubles. Our Immanuel, God with us, was born. He has taken away our guilt. He has assured us

that God is on our side. As Paul writes, (Romans 8:31-39), **“If God is for us, who can be against us?”** God is with us. We are on the winning side! The year 2013 will be a year that we experience that joy and gladness that faith in the Savior gives. Even though we may see troubles like storm clouds around us right now

The next verses remind us that we play a part in God’s fulfillment of his promises. **4“Listen to me, my people;”** (As you hear that term “My people, don’t overlook the comfort there! Even though your conscience accuses you and says, “God can’t want you!” God says in this little term “my people,” “I don’t care what your conscience says. I am claiming you as my own!) **“Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. 5 My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.”** The LORD promises that the law will go out. For most of us, “law” has a negative connotation. But the Hebrew word “Torah” just means “teaching.” It includes the commandments and the promises of God. God will make his teaching go out.

**“My justice will become a light to the nations.”** The word “justice” in English also has a negative connotation. God in his justice condemns the guilty. But God’s justice also includes his gospel justice. His justice is also that he declares us not guilty because Jesus, his Son, died in our place. His justice is also that Jesus’ perfect life is credited to us by God. It is certainly this gospel justice that God has in mind here, for it will become a light to the nations.

**“The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.”** God’s Old Testament people were not a seafaring people. So when the Bible talks about “the islands,” it is referring to the ends of the earth. Today we might say “the people in Timbuktu.” The people far away will hear of this gospel justice and look with eager expectation for God’s help. Where are “the islands” today? Perhaps not so much geographic, as world travel and the internet have made far away lands much more accessible. But there are lots of spiritual places far away from God. Like the hearts of all those people who need God’s spiritual help. Yes, they are the islands far from God, but God promises that he can even lead the islands to hope in him.

But how is God going to do that? He is going to use us, isn’t he! So I would encourage you as you look at 2013 to look around and see that you are part of God’s faithfulness. He has already planned how he will use you as his tool in 2013 to bring hope to the hopeless. Now that doesn’t mean I can look around the bend and see through the fog. But I do know that if 2013 brings health and financial blessings, then God will use those circumstances to fulfill his promise to bring the gospel justice to those around me. And if 2013 brings health problems and financial disaster, then I know that God will use those circumstances to fulfill his promise to bring hope to those far away from him. The future has a purpose. And God will accomplish his purpose through us. Look around and see your part in God’s faithfulness.

But even God’s tools get worn down and tired. What should we do when we get tired in the future? Where does the last verse of our text invite us to look? **6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.”** Everything in this world is only temporary. When you grow tired, look up and see the fulfillment of God’s faithfulness. Look up to the heavens and know that some day you will see Jesus coming in the clouds and you will see the perfect joy and gladness he has prepared for us.

So what shall we do as we enter 2013. I’d suggest we become like little children. If we put aside our worrying and look only at what is truly important, we will surely see God’s faithful hand in all that is in our hearts and lives. Look back and see his faithfulness in the past. Look forward with confidence in his faithfulness for the future. Look around and see that you have a part in God being faithful to his promises. And look up with eager anticipation for Jesus’ return. If we closely look around, we’ll surely see God’s faithful hand in all that we have found. Amen.