

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

Pastor Mark Gartner

Sermon for New Year's Eve -- December 31st, 2013 and New Year's Day -- January 1st, 2014

Numbers 6:24-27

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

Dear children of our God,

At the end of the year, it seems like everyone takes time to look back on what kind of year it was. Everywhere you turn you see top 10 lists for 2013. 10 best songs of 2013. 10 best movies. 10 most visited websites. 10 most-watched YouTube videos. The lists are everywhere. Time magazine put out their Top Ten Lists. The top movie for 2013 was “Gravity” starring Sandra Bullock. Top money making movie of 2013 was “Iron Man 3” – grossing over 1 billion dollars. Top US News Story was Edward Snowden and the spy leaks. Top World News Story was Syria's Civil War. The Top TV Show was “Enlightened” (HBO). Top Electronic Gadget was the “Google Chromecast” which allows you to watch movies or anything else from your tablet or laptop on your TV wirelessly and the Top App. was “Candy Crush”.

Today in as we gather in God's house, we will also look back at 2013 and look forward to 2014 and kind of make our own kind of list. The best part about this list is that it doesn't change when we flip over the calendar. It is not based on consumer satisfaction or appeal. The list we will be putting together will last forever and forever. The list we are putting together will be list that reminds us how much . . .

Theme: The Lord Blesses Us!

- 1. In our hearts**
- 2. In our lives**

The words of our text were given by God to Moses who was to give them to Aaron the first High Priest. God wanted Aaron to speak these words to remind the people of Israel that they had the blessing of the LORD wherever they went. These words are very familiar to us, because we hear these words at the end of our worship service, but sometimes I think we forget what it truly means to receive the blessing from the LORD. These words are very fitting as we think of what the LORD means in our lives, especially as we think back a year and as we look forward with the LORD'S blessings to a new year. And much like the blessing that we hear at the end of the worship service, do we always remember that God has blessed us with in the past and that we have the promise of his continued blessings in the future?

“The LORD bless you and keep you. . . . So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.” One of the blessings that we sometimes overlook is that God has blessed us this past year through His Word which we were able to freely hear here at our home Church of St. Luke's. In the past year, I counted 68 distinct worship services conducted here at St. Luke's. In every one of those services, the Word of God was read and the Word of God was explained and expounded upon for your edification. 68 times God spoke to your heart. He convicted you of your sin and disobedience. He comforted you with the assurance of your forgiveness. 68 times you heard about Jesus' holiness, and his innocent death on the cross for your sins. 68 times, the Holy Spirit was strengthening your faith and drawing you closer to God almighty. Wow, we have been blessed, haven't we? Praise God for the Word proclaimed in his church

during the past year, and look forward to the 68 or so occasions coming up in 2014 to grow in your relationship with the God who made you and saved you!

I know that you can read and hear God's Word in your homes and in many other places and I know that many of you have made God's Word a key priority in your life. But with this blessing from God firmly rooted in our hearts and minds, let me ask you this? Did you come to all 68 times and hear the Word of God? Is his Word the top priority in your daily life? Now let's make it clear -- God isn't in heaven with his big checklist making sure that you come a certain percentage of the time as if church attendance is some kind of good work that we can check off our list in serving God. God isn't sending out little "spiritual detention slips" to all those whose church attendance has dipped under 25%. Our Lord Jesus wants to remind us that God's blessings flow to us in many ways and one of the greatest ways is as we hear and are fed by his saving Word. This past year over 26,000 people's hearts were fed by God's Word here at St. Luke's. 26,000 hearts that heard of sin and grace. 26,000 hearts that grew and were strengthened. 26,000 hearts that we were filled with thanks and praise to their gracious God and who then left this building to let their thanks and praise overflow in their everyday lives.

This past year God not only used the gift of his Word in worship, but he also blessed us through the Sacraments. Baptism is one of those sacraments that is used by the Holy Spirit to create and strengthen faith in a person's heart. St. Luke's has over 1,500 people whose hearts have seen God's love and forgiveness through the water and the Word in Baptism. This past year 11 more people were washed clean of their sins and connected to Jesus through Holy Baptism. Jesus commanded baptism before he ascended in Matthew 28:19 - **"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."**

The wonderful thing about the blessings of Baptism is that the blessings of Baptism never run out. Have you thought about all the blessings that you received in the past from your Baptism and are still receiving at this very moment from your Baptism? We need to be careful when we talk about our baptism by saying "I was baptized" as if it something that happened in the past, but isn't important today. Instead we can say with boldness and confidence, "I AM baptized!" We received daily strength and motivation for godly living through our baptisms every day that we are in this world!

Also the sacrament of Lord's Supper has been a blessing to us. During the past year, we celebrated the Lord's Supper 28 times. Over 8,500 individuals have lined up right here to receive the Lord's very body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Through this sacrament, the Lord's true body and blood together with the bread and wine has strengthened our faith time and again. 28 times we were given the wonderful opportunity to receive the Lord's very body together with the bread that was given on the cross for our sins. 28 times we were given the wonderful opportunity to drink his very blood with the wine which was shed for the guilt of every one of our sins. 28 times, were able to hear and believe the words -- "Depart now with peace and joy. Your sins ARE forgiven." These are most certainly rich blessings from the Lord!

And the blessings in the Lord's Supper go further. In his holy supper we are one with Christ as we participate in his body and blood. But we are also one with each other in the body of Christ together with those who believe in all of the teachings of God's Word as we do. We express our unity when we commune together. This we hear in: **1 Corinthians 10:15-17 "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."**

But the blessings of God don't stop there. This past year 29 young people and 2 adults made their Confirmation promises before God and filled with God's strength they promised to remain firm in their faith until God calls them home to heaven. These 31 people have been welcomed to come to the Lord's

Supper and to be fed the Gospel found in the Sacraments and in God's Word. These 31 people are joining together with the many other souls here at St. Luke's to praise God with their hearts and lives.

And isn't that what we are here for? We are here to be blessed by God and his gracious love and forgiveness, but we are also here to live and thank our Lord and Savior as we live our daily lives. This past year, we have certainly seen this through the countless hours of time and effort that was given here at St. Luke's and in your daily lives to make sure that God's Word was being spread wherever and whenever God made it possible. There have been generous and cheerful thankofferings given this past year to support the work here at St. Luke's and throughout the world through our Mission Offerings. People have been invited to hear God's Word by you. People have heard God's Word from you. As God reminds us that Harvest is ripe and the time is near for the Lord's return. May we remember this as we look forward to 2014 with a renewed sense of faithfulness and love as we gather around God's Word and as we go out into the world with God's blessings and strength.

Many times we look at blessings from the LORD and only look short-term, but God reminds us, **"The LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."** God's face has certainly shined on the people gathered here at St. Luke's. God's face has not only turned towards us for the year 2013. But for the past 165 years, St. Luke's has been preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments by God's grace and favor. God's blessings have been pouring out on us for a long time – all the way back to 1848. How many countless souls have been comforted and how many souls have been fed through the different Pastors and leaders of this congregation? All of this is certainly a blessing from our LORD.

But we also need to remember that God's blessings sometimes come even in times of suffering and sadness. As we have said before, God has been feeding souls here at St. Luke's a lot longer than just for the year 2013. In those years, many, many members have passed from this world of sorrows into eternal glory. Having been blessed by God for years in his church, they received what was promised: the salvation of their souls. 2013 is no different. We especially remember the 9 children of God whose funerals were held this past year and now have went to be with the Lord. These children of God have fought the fight with God's help and now rest from their labors. Lorraine Rose, Ralph Stendel, Thomas Petersen, Dean Elske, Ken Sellnow, Doris Marcks, Robert Lipski, Minna Oestreich and Irene Oestreich all are enjoying the greatest blessing of all to be gathered around the throne of God where there is no more sin or sadness or sorrow. Finally, isn't this is what St. Luke's is all about... preparing souls for eternity. Through the Gospel in Word and sacrament, which, praise be to God our church has and uses faithfully, we are ready to stand before our holy God trusting that the blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed us from our sins. And our church family has helped us stay strong in this faith. For this, we surely must praise God!

Dear members of St. Luke's. I pray that you don't take for granted the tremendous, eternal blessings God has showered upon you during the past year! Praise his name for the things we have talked about today. Praise him for his love and grace that forgives us over and over again. Praise him for his blessings that we can't begin to count both physically and most important spiritually. And with God in our hearts and minds, look forward with eager anticipation to the continued amazing blessings you will receive in God's church in 2014! God is blessing us forever and forever. **"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."** Amen