

Dear Members and Friends of St. John Lutheran Church,

Everyone can understand **the benefits of a new start**. Whether it's a new financial start (like having your poor credit rating erased, or your debt forgiven), or like having a relationship mended, with both parties willing to let bygones be bygones. Our God is a God of new starts. Each time He forgives us our sins, He also forgets our sins – He wipes away our past record. While living in this state of grace is wonderful, it's not a license to ignore God. It's not an invitation to sin whenever we want, expecting God to continue to turn a blind eye toward us.

Let's examine last year for just a moment. How did sin last year make your life more difficult? How did sin strip you of the joy that God intended for your life? Did you see yourself get stronger spiritually, or was it a time of back-sliding? You may think that these questions are not important – that it doesn't matter what your faith-life looks like. But the Bible tells a different story about sin and its affect on us:

But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (1 Timothy 6:11-12, ESV)

St. Paul reminds us in his letter to Timothy, his friend and coworker, to *fight the good fight*. Take hold of eternal life. This 'taking hold' is nothing more than trusting in our Lord Jesus Christ, and confessing with our lips that He is Lord. We trust in our Lord when we are nourished and fed spiritually. We trust when we have God's Word before us at least weekly (preferably daily). One way that we know that we are being fed and nourished by God's Word is that we are **excited to confess with our lips** that He is Lord of our life. Notice that confession doesn't come first. We don't decide to become a Christian, and confess this, so that God can come and dwell within us. No, confession is always a **response** to receiving the Holy Spirit, the new life we have in Christ. St. Paul writes in Romans chapter 10:

because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

The 'believing with the heart' comes first. This is a gift from our God. In worship each week, we publicly confess one of the Creeds (Apostles' or Nicene). We do this **not** to satisfy the requirements of Scripture, so that God can check-off our name as someone who confessed publicly. We do this because it **bubbles up from a heart that has been changed by a loving God**, who sent his only Son to die for our sins. If you're having difficulty confessing the Creeds with joy in your heart, it may be that you're having a bad day or week. But if you continually question the need to confess, may I suggest that you need spiritual nourishment. This doesn't mean that God is not still part of your life; that the Holy Spirit is missing.

However, this is a strong indication that you're *spiritually anemic*. **Weak faith** makes it difficult for us, as Christians, to experience the fruits of the Spirit, including Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-Control (Gal. 5:22-23). And this affects every part of our life.

The solution is the *means of grace* – God's Word and the Sacrament of the Altar (Communion). We need to be in church *every* weekend, if we're physically able. No excuses, please. We don't make out our weekly schedule, and then fit worship in *if and where we can*. The same goes for Bible study and Sunday school. God uses His word to sustain us and grow us. We have weekly organized Bible Studies, led by myself or other members. These are so important for every Christian – young and old.

How great would it be if we trusted Him more, and worried less? How much better would life be if some of the sins that continue to haunt us were overcome by God's power and strength, working in us? **It's not an impossible dream** – God is very real and very willing to help. We can turn from the sin that is so damaging. We can grow in our relationship to our Lord. We can grow in our trust of Him, and in our joy in serving Him.

We have a God that has given us the forgiveness of sins, and the promise that He will remember them no more, because of our faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. That's a new start! What will we do with this new year – this new opportunity? As we're reminded at the beginning of every new calendar year, life is a series of choices. We all make decisions that have a very real impact on our future. May our Lord help us to keep Him at the center of our life. **May we cherish His means of grace – the very way that He blesses us and keeps us close to Him.** May God lead each of us to a stronger faith, and a richer and more fulfilled life, by the power of His Spirit, working through His word.

Pastor Travis