

GOD'S LOVE WILL KEEP ON GOING IN THE NEW YEAR!

2012 has arrived! Praise the LORD! Happy New Year, too! Did you do anything special last night? How many of me do you see preaching this morning?

Are we here today because it is Sunday and we are “**Remembering the Sabbath Day?**” Or are we here because it is New Year's Day and we want to start off the New Year in the right relationship with God? Or both? At first glance there is not much in the Scriptures about celebrating New Year's Day. But if you dig a little, there suddenly appears quite a bit about New Year's Day.

Ever since the 10th plague when the children of God were enslaved in Egypt at the time of Moses, the Jewish spiritual year begins in late March or early April. It coincides with the Passover. Our church year begins in late November with Advent. Since Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC, the government and businesses of Israel has followed the same calendar that begins on January 1st. Their lunar calendar New Year begins in late fall with the celebration of Rosh Hashanah. In time this date has been jointed together with the Feast of Trumpets.

Their New Year began with the blast of a ram's horn, calling on God's people to repent for their sins of the past year. It included the invitation to leave behind the temptations of the world and the sins of the flesh and start the New Year with a clean spiritual slate. The Jewish people brought in the New Year with the focus on five spiritual actions. These included: time for personal soul searching; forgiveness of others; repentance for one's sins and receiving God's forgiveness; remembering the judgment of God; and joyfully looking forward to God's fatherly goodness and mercy in the coming New Year.

With the celebration of Rosh Hashanah comes a special meal. It includes “Challah” or round wheat bread and sliced apples dipped in honey. This symbolizes the sweetness of God's love and mercy coming in the New Year. This is greatly different from the way our culture celebrates January first! For us horns blast as a huge crystal ball drops over Time Square. Our emphasis is not on spiritual reflection but on parades, football, and parties. There will probably be more people at the stadiums of NFL games this afternoon than the number of Lutherans in worship this morning!

Now please understand that there is nothing wrong with parades, the NFL, or celebrating with friends and family. Yet, as Christians today, perhaps we can learn a few things about observing the New Year from our Jewish spiritual forefathers and apply these to our lives today. Might I suggest that in addition to the gayety of our secular events, and in place of making all those resolutions that we rarely keep beyond the first of February, we partake of the five spiritual activities associated with Rosh Hashanah?

First, let us with sincere soul searching review and reflect on the year 2011. What did we do right? In what ways might we improve? Have we mistreated anyone, neglected anyone in need, or hurt anyone? What have we learned about strengthening our relationships with others and the LORD? Have we walked and talked with Jesus every day and react in life as Jesus would do? How can we grow spiritually in 2012? How can our lives show others we are children of God in 2012?

Second, how have we handled forgiveness? Have we dropped all grudges and forgiven those who wronged us? Paul tells us in Ephesians, “**Forgive each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.**” Forgive totally and conditionally! Have we reached out and begun to rebuild relationships damaged by our sins? Imagine the impact a new start will have on our relationships, friendships, marriages, families, and workplace?

Third, it is important that we start not only with a clean slate with others, but with our LORD and Savior, too. Let us admit our sins against God. Let us ask God for forgiveness, trusting that the blood of Jesus has paid for our sins and through faith in Jesus we are forgiven. As we ask for God’s gracious forgiveness let us consider how our lives might show the sincerity of our repentance and our thankfulness for God’s absolution.

Fourth, let us remember God’s judgment! In Colossians, Paul writes that Jesus fulfills all of the Old Testament festivals and religious holidays. Since Rosh Hashanah focus includes the righteous, just judgment of God coming, we in the Christian era look to the Second Coming of Jesus fulfilling this judgment of God. As we remember that Jesus is coming soon to judge the world, let us prepare ourselves for this great event by a life of repentance and a new life of faith and obedience.

And fifth, we too can start the New Year with joy! As we remain in the Word, read and study the Word, we remember the promises of God never to leave us, to

always be with us to love us, forgive us, guide us, provide for us, and protect us from the evil one! We look to the New Year of 2012, confident that our LORD Jesus, who **“is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow... will never fail us nor forsake us.”** We know that God’s love, mercy, and daily bread will continue to flow into our lives. We have nothing to fear about the year 2012! To help you learn God’s promises and be confident of His faithfulness, I am challenging each of you to join with me and read the entire Bible in 2012! Your walk with God will be blessed!

In the coming year the economy may continue to be a struggle. God promises to give us our daily bread. Being an election year, things will become nasty and ugly, but hopefully not violent or bloody as in other nations. Remember God is still in charge! Jobs may be shaky. Be sure that God will care for your needs. Loved ones may become flaky and relationships strained. If so, let it go and reconcile! Sickness may strike; loved ones may pass away, and death may face you in the eye. God is still with you; God will never leave you. Jesus promises to be **“with you always!”**

In this new year of 2012, hear Jesus say, **“Don’t be afraid.”** Jesus is Immanuel: **“God is with us!”** When Joshua was chosen to begin a new era in the history of God’s people and follow in the steps of Moses, God made him a promise. That same promise God gives to you today! As you live your life of faith and walk with God in 2012, **“Be strong and courageous. Don’t be afraid or in fear. The LORD your God is with you. He will not fail you nor forsake you!”**

As you begin 2012, be assured of God’s love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Be comforted in God’s presence. Be strengthened by God’s promises and faithfulness. Live in God’s grace, trust His Word, and follow Jesus, and you will have a happy, blessed, and joyous New Year! IJN, amen!