

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We have come to the end of another year, and if in the past we have been glad to reach the year's end and celebrate the new year, this year that's so in spades. 2020 will be a year to remember.

At the Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and First Sunday after Christmas Services, I purposefully avoided talking about this virus we have been burdened with for 10 months now, with its lockdowns and mask wearing and incessant hand washing — some of these are being called “the new normal.” I say again tonight, “No!” But thoughts of this virus can hardly be avoided as we think back on the year ended and as the virus affects us into the new year, affecting not only our health, but also how we are living right now.

This 2020 virus is being remembered alongside of the 1918 Spanish flu. That virus killed 675,000 in the US ([www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html)). As of this morning, the US had 342,312 reported coronavirus deaths ([coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/united-states](http://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/united-states)) — less ... about half, but still significant. And we're not done with this virus, yet. We don't know what history will record as the final tally, we say with sadness, for, for each of these deaths, there are individuals and families that are mourning. We pray the Lord's mercy upon them.

And yet, if I think back prior to hearing about this novel coronavirus, I have to admit — perhaps to my shame — if I had heard of the Spanish flu, it didn't really make an impression on me. The almost 700 thousand deaths did not influence me in the slightest. And it's not apparent that that influenza virus affected the way we did things in church. The Church, begun by her Savior, built on the Rock rejected and the confession of His name, continued on unfettered, masklessly singing her praises, greeting one another with handshakes and hugs, engaging in Christian conversation and consolation, drinking from the one cup of blessing, the communion of Christ's blood. And I submit, if “past is prologue,” it will be that way again as this virus goes away and memory of it fades.

For memories do fade, but divine things do not! Jesus' presence will not depart from us: “*behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matt. 28:20). The Church will not pass away; not even “*the gates of hell shall ... prevail against*” her (Matt. 16:18). God's word will not fade away; St. Peter writes: “*The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever*” (1 Pet. 1:24-25). Jesus Himself said, “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away*” (Matt. 24:35).

And as long as there are disciples to be made, as long as there are those destined to believe, so will God's means to make these disciples abide, namely baptism. As we heard St. Paul teach us tonight, baptism makes us sons of God; baptism clothes us with Christ; baptism unites us with Christ; baptism makes us *"heirs according to promise."*

And baptism's promise does not fade away, as Peter says, for baptism causes *"us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you"* (1 Pet. 1:3-4). Not only does the promise not fade away, but the inheritance itself does not fade, again as St. Peter says, *"when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory"* (1 Pet. 5:4).

Of course, our assurance here comes ultimately from Him whose name is placed upon us in holy Baptism, the name which Mary's child Himself received on the eighth day. *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins"* (Acts 2:38).

Mary's child was called Jesus on the eighth day — this name means "the Lord is salvation." It was the name given Him by the angel before He was even conceived. It's the name that bears witness to who He is; it's the name that bears witness to His destiny to save His people from their sins.

And His naming happens as He sheds His blood for the first time by circumcision, foreshadowing that the salvation He brings will be by His blood, for St. Paul says, God has *"forgiven us all our trespasses, ... [by] canceling the record of [our] debt [by] nailing it to the cross"* (Col. 2:13-14), for *"without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins"* (Heb. 9:22).

Jesus circumcision also gave the church a type that is fulfilled in holy Baptism, as St. Paul says again, *"In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead"* (Col. 2:11-12).

Truly, our hope comes from our Lord Jesus *"who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification"* (Rom. 4:25), and who by baptism unites us to the same death and resurrection and promises our own resurrection (Rom. 6:4-5). As St. Peter again says, *"Baptism ... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ"* (1 Pet. 3:21). This all fits together hand in glove, for remember how Peter spoke about us being *"born again to a living*

hope,” and he anchored that hope in “*the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*” (1 Pet. 1:3).

This is the name that we bear; it comes with the Lord's blessing bestowed upon us; it fills us with hope not just for the new year but for eternity. For this virus that burdens us will come to an end, but not so the “*steadfast love of the LORD.*” His love “*never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is [His] faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him'*” (Lam. 3:22-24).

The memory of this virus, too, will fade away in time. Not so the Lord's goodness to us, not so His grace bestowed in holy Baptism; they are new every morning. For even though baptism, like Jesus' circumcision, is a one time event, it has daily implications with eternal consequences, for, as Luther teaches, in daily contrition and repentance remembering our baptism, we drown the old Adam in us along “with all sins and evil desires” and “arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” ... forever!

Therefore, let us end this year and begin the new as Christians with unfading hope: “*forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [let us] press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” (Phil. 3:13-14).

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.