

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

It's another New Year's Eve; tomorrow begins a new year. What lies ahead of us, we cannot say. We make plans for the coming year, and Jesus encourages us to "*count the cost*" (Luke 14:28-30) of our intended endeavors. We pray for Lord's blessings, but we don't know how those plans will work out.

I find it a bit annoying to hear people quote Jeremiah as if he is referring to the plans they have made — "*I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope*" (Jer. 29:11). How presumptuous to think that whatever plans they have made are identical to God's! We can't know that; after all, Jeremiah is speaking to God's people in exile; and when Jesus talks about counting the cost, it's in the context of the cost of discipleship and bearing our crosses. Who prays for crosses to bear? No, rather, we pray for good outcomes to our plans, but we can't know if our plans will come to the end we desire. We must leave it up to God. *Deo volente*, "God willing," as one of our members is fond of saying.

The fact is, however, that the Lord DOES have plans for us. Even if we don't know them, He does, and we can hope in them, for, even as the Lord told Israel, they are plans for our good, for our welfare, our future, and our hope. As we enter into this new year, therefore, be encouraged to look to the Lord for your good — that is what Luther says it means to have a god, after all: "A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. So, to have a God is nothing other than trusting and believing Him with the heart. I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol" (Luther, Large Catechism, First Commandment, 2). Yes, look to the Lord and trust in Him. He is faithful; and when it comes to His plans, He will do it. As He says over and over: "*I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it*" (Eze. 36:36).

Indeed, God made plans for our eternal welfare immediately after the fall into sin, and in chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel, the fulfillment of those plans is a major theme. For God promised to send a Savior, as we heard again on Christmas — the offspring of woman (Gen. 3:15), a son, "God with us," to be born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14) — and Luke reports that while in Bethlehem, "*the days were fulfilled for [Mary, a virgin mother] to give birth*" to that Immanuel, one who would be the "Savior" of the world, "*Christ, the Lord*" (Luke 2:11). "*And she gave birth to her firstborn son ...*" (Luke 2:6-7).

The ESV translates the phrase: "*the time came for her to give birth,*" but unlike in last Sunday's Epistle, where a Greek word for time was used — χρόνος, "*in the*

*fullness of time*" (Gal. 4:4) — neither of the Greek words for "time" is used by Luke. Besides, the ESV's translation makes it all sound ordinary.

But Jesus' birth was in no way ordinary; it was supernatural, directed by God Himself, from selecting this young maid, to her miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit, to the requirement to travel to Bethlehem, to His birth itself. This was God in action, a divine fulfillment.

Similarly, in today's reading, the ESV translates it "*at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised.*" More faithful to the text is: "*and when the eight days were fulfilled for [them] to circumcise him,*" that is, Jesus.

Here again was a divine fulfillment. God had chosen pious believers, Mary and Joseph, to be the mother and guardian of Jesus, and they saw to it that this still helpless infant kept the Law of Moses. It required a knife to be used thus on Jesus, a shedding of His blood, foreshadowing another divine fulfillment of the spilling of His innocent blood, pierced, crushed, wounded for our iniquities (Isa. 53:5). Jesus had counted the cost of our redemption, and He paid it willingly, not with "*silver or gold, but with [His own] precious blood ..., like that of a lamb without blemish or spot*" (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

But this Old Testament sign of circumcision, and Jesus' own circumcision, point us to another fulfillment, a New Testament fulfillment, namely, baptism. For, as St. Paul said, the Law was put in place, including the Law's demand for circumcision, until faith had come — faith in Christ Jesus. For Christ put an end to the demands of the law for us by His obedience. When we are in Christ, "*the righteous requirement of the law [has been] fulfilled in us*" (Rom. 8:4). Christ's righteousness is credited to us. That's why St. Paul goes on to tell the Galatians: "*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery,*" that is, to the legal demands of circumcision. "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love*" (Gal. 5:1, 6).

Again, "*neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation*" (Gal. 6:15); that is God's work through "*the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*" (Tit. 3:5). It's a different kind of circumcision that we have all received, "*a circumcision made without hands,*" a circumcision of the heart, as God desires, and which the Lord God Himself effects: "*the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live*" (Deut. 30:6). God does it through "*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).*

Baptized into Christ, we are in Christ Jesus; we are new creations; we belong to Him; we have been incorporated into Him, clothed and girded by Him, by the Holy Spirit given faith in Him, made sons of God by Him.

It means our lives are now ruled by Him, a good reminder as we make plans for the coming year. Do it in full recognition of who we are in Christ. As St. Paul says in Colossians: *“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:6-8).*

And when you fail to walk in Christ as you should, when some Christ-less philosophy takes you captive — we are fallible sinners, after all — you know the remedy: daily contrition and repentance. In this way, put *“off the body of the flesh”* (Col. 2:11), that you might live in the forgiveness of sins, and that “the new man [might] daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (Small Catechism, Baptism, part 4). Finally, do not neglect the gathering of the baptized, but be diligent in coming to receive all the good gifts God has for you. In this way, regardless the success of the plans you make, God will indeed bless you in the coming year. God is faithful; you can count on it.

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