

Luke 12:35–40
New Year's Eve
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
December 31, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

On the threshold of this new year of our LORD, 2024, we look back at the past year, 2023, and thank God for all the blessings He has given us. In His mercy, God has allowed the world to exist for yet another year, allowing that many more of His elect children to enter the Kingdom. Every year the Church grows larger and larger as saints are born in the waters of Holy Baptism, and as saints are born into heavenly glory to await the resurrection of the dead. This past year, we witnessed six baptisms. We've been fed by God's Word and Holy Supper on Sundays and festival days. We've engaged with the message of the prophets and apostles in the Holy Scriptures at Bible Study, Sunday School, and catechesis. We've sat at the feet of our fathers in the faith, learning to confess our faith with the language of the Lutheran Confessions. We've laughed together and cried together, we've confessed our sins and we've confessed our faith. We've enjoyed our life together for what it truly is: a glorious gift from God. Think about everything that has happened in the last year in the world, in our church, in your family, and in yourself.

We thank the LORD for all He has done to us, in us, and through us throughout the year 2023. But we also look ahead in faith, trusting the LORD will continue providing for us in the year 2024. It's been said that the Hebrew way of looking at time is quite a bit different than our western, Greco-Roman influenced way of looking at time. We tend to think of the past as something behind us and the future as what lies ahead. There is truth to this. The Hebrews,

however, recognized that we can only see the past and present. The future is hidden from our eyes. We tend to think we're moving forward. And we are, but we move forward by walking backwards. All we can see is how God provided for us in the past and continues providing for us today. And so we trust that He will continue guiding us in the future as He guides the very steps we take. It takes faith to move forward backwards, only seeing what has been and then trusting in God's providence for the future. So the best way to move forward is to continue looking back, while at the same time trusting the LORD to guide our steps.

As we approach the new year with hope, or fear, with doubts and dread, or with longing and confidence, we are reminded in our Gospel Lesson this evening to stay dressed for action and keep our lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, to open the door when He comes and knocks. This imagery of a night watchman is often used in Scripture, especially at the end of the church year as we focus on Christ's return for judgment. How appropriate, then, that this imagery is used tonight as people around the world stay up past their bedtime to greet the new year at Midnight. We stay up in the company of friends and family, eating snacks, drinking some champagne, playing games, watching the ball drop in New York City, watching "Dinner for One," or whatever other traditions you might have. We stay dressed for action with the lights on lest we doze and miss the big event.

It was different for a watchman. Think of this in terms of a soldier keeping watch. Maybe he's in the company of friends, or with a partner who's asleep, or on his own. We're in our warm homes, he's out in the cold. We're eating snacks, he's shivering and longing for the morning. But he's dressed for action and has his lamp burning, lest he fall asleep and miss the signs of an approaching enemy. His life and the life of his people depend on keeping watch.

The image of the watchmen in our Gospel Lesson this evening isn't so much that of a military watch, as of men waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, to open the door when he returns from the reception. So it's a combination of the watchmen and the wedding imagery in the Bible. What's the implication here? The Bridegroom is returning with His Bride to consummate the wedding, to make it valid not only before the witnesses but before God. The Bridegroom returns from the wedding feast to cleave to His Bride as one flesh. And His attendants are there to let him in. Today it's more common for a bride and groom to spend their wedding night in a hotel. Even there, how awful would it be if the worker at the front desk dozed off and wasn't there to let the groom in? He'd have a furious groom on his hands!

The picture, here, is the return of Christ on the Last Day. Our Bridegroom, Jesus, is coming soon to consummate the marriage with His Bride, the Church. He's already gone to prepare a place for His Bride, where we will live with Him in eternal glory. You, the watchmen, the church, are to always be prepared for His coming. It could be anytime, so be prepared! Stay dressed for action in the garment of Holy Baptism. Stay dressed for action by wearing the armor of God. As a soldier on watch has all his gear with him, make sure you're prepared as well. Listen to God's Word. Repent of your sins and confess them to your pastor. Receive the Absolution from the pastor as from God Himself. Bring your children to Baptism. Partake of the Lord's Supper regularly and make sure you're prepared when you receive it.

Resolve to lead a Christian life and overcome the temptations of evil one. The world makes New Year's resolutions for this life. You are to make resolutions that have an eternal impact. If there's anytime to get your act together, it starts right now. Jesus could return at anytime, whether on the Last Day, or when you stand before His throne of judgment right after you die. So be prepared to meet Him. Keep your lamps burning. Procure the oil that keeps the

flame of faith aglow. Or else you'll be like the five foolish virgins who had no more oil. When Christ returns, there's no more time to fetch oil. So tend to your faith right now during this season of grace.

Blessed are those servants whom the Master finds awake when He comes. Truly, I say to you, He will dress Himself for service and have them recline at table, and He will come and serve them. The LORD Jesus Christ already comes to you to serve you. He comes to you in His Word and He comes to you in His Sacraments. The highest form of worship is simply to receive the forgiveness of sins God has prepared for you in Jesus Christ. And if He comes to serve you already now, how much more so will He serve you in eternal life? What you experience now is only a foretaste of what's coming. What Jesus is saying is that those who faithfully watch for their Master here in time will enjoy life in God's family in eternity. The servants become sons because the Son became a servant. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive. This is the life of our Master, so this is our life as well. We're all servants of God because God is always serving us. So will it be in eternity.

Tonight, you know exactly when the clock will strike midnight. You know exactly what you're waiting for and how long it will take. The time will come and then you can finally go to bed. Or stay up for a few more hours. Just remember we have church at 10am. But the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. So be prepared at all times. Live every moment of every day of your life as if Jesus could return right then. Look to the past with thanksgiving and look to the future with hope, knowing that one day, our Christian hope and expectation will be fulfilled. Jesus is returning to judge the living and the dead. The Bridegroom is coming to fetch you, His Bride, to live with you forever in the new heavens and the new earth. May this hope of life everlasting affect all your thinking tonight and everyday. Stay dressed for action and keep

your lamps burning.. The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. In the name of
Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ
Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.