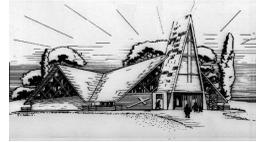




Free Evangelical Lutheran
Synod in South Africa

Sermon - New Year's Day

*God will cleanse us and give us a new
heart and spirit!*



St. John's Lutheran Parish Shelly Beach

• The Word of God for this Sermon is written in Ezekiel 36, 22-32:

- **ESV** 22 "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.
- 23 And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.
- 24 I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land.
- 25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.
- 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.
- 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.
- 28 You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.
- 29 And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you.
- 30 I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations.
- 31 Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations.
- 32 It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.
- *Let us pray: Come Holy Spirit, open our ears and remove the heart of stone from us and give us the right heart and spirit! Amen.*

• **Dear Israel of God!**

- Today is Sunday after Christmas according to the Church Year and New Year's Day according to the Gregorian calendar which is the most widespread calendar used in the world of today. This calendar starts counting from Jesus' year of birth, as determined by the church in the 6th century. So both calendars are aligned to God's Word, indirectly give witness of Christ. Some people try to hide the fact that most of the world is confessing Christ's mega influence in the world by counting years AD or BC by renaming it to Common Era. But this is completely a-historical and unscientific.
- So we will continue to use AD and BC as a witness to Christ!

- Today we need to speak about the word “new”. If you want to start this “new” year only with human issues and affairs in mind, if you hope for a new year without taking into consideration what God says and does, then this is not a new year starting today. This will be simply the old one carrying on.
- In the Bible the word “new” is only used for something God creates and accomplishes! We human beings cannot make anything new, as in really new! Only God can create something out of nothing! Only God can make alive what was dead.
- This takes us to the wonderful watchword for today and for this year. God’s promise of going to do a really new thing with His people. The emphasis is absolutely on that He will do it with them. He will give them something which will result in a new nation, a new people of Israel and a new land! As this year will also be the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, which emphasises Grace alone by faith alone, faith being a gift of God, it is a very fitting verse for this year!
- Let us first look in what situation the Israelites found themselves when they heard these words of God. Israel was divided after king Solomon in Israel and Juda. Israel went into exile by the Assyrians while later Juda including Jerusalem went into exile by the Babylonians! So, the people of God are in exile, they had been driven out of the promised land that the Lord had provided and given to them.
- Under Joshua the fathers had made their decisions and promises that they would not do anything against God’s commandments, against the Law of His covenant, He cut with them. Then followed some good times and some bad times, some kings who followed the will of God and some who didn’t follow the will of God. But in the end, the nation unravelled and they even shed blood amongst each other. Juda fought against Israel and vice versa. Nobody was keeping the covenant of God. They all followed their own agendas.
- This is when God made this promise that He will one day make a new covenant with them. This covenant will be new in the sense that it would not depend on anything they did. They were so messed up, they had defiled, made unclean, their land by *their* ways and *their* deeds. That is when the Lord poured out His wrath on them for the blood they had shed in the promised land, for the idols with which they had defiled it. God said, *“in accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them.”* And when they came to the nations whereto they were dispersed they profaned God’s holy name. Then God says something quite astonishing, namely, [22]: *“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.”* The Lord is adamant about His name amongst the nations. Why? Because that could jeopardise His mission to save the world! That is why God did arrange it that the Israelites could go back to the promised land under Cyrus.
- But the promise of the new covenant was only fulfilled with the coming of Jesus Christ! The sprinkling of the clean water and the giving of the new heart and spirit, that began on Pentecost in Jerusalem. In that time and day it is recorded that all Jews under heaven were gathered in Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit of God was poured onto all flesh.

• Here we have the OT promise for it [25-26]: *“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”*

• What the OT covenant could not accomplish God was doing in the New Testament. He washes away our sins in Baptism and gives a new heart and a new spirit. He will remove the heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh, God says. Let me stress it again, do you realise, who is doing this? It is God who is doing it, completely and only God. Of course He uses His servants of the word to sprinkle the water on the participants and to speak His Words. He does it through them. Nobody pours water on himself and speaks God’s Word over himself. Nobody can baptise himself or herself.

• What does this mean? The fact that you are baptised and believe, that you have a heart of faith is only God’s doing. Only He should get the credit for it. He created the new heart and spirit in you whilst you were dead in your sins. He created the new being of trust in God’s Word in you. This is not something any human being can create in one another nor in himself. That is why faith is a such wonderful gift of God. And because it is a gift from God Himself which creates everything necessary to fully become His child, it is such good news to the worst sinners!

• There is always hope. His Grace is new every morning. There is always a new beginning possible. But to whom does God speak this wonderful promise? He spoke it to the whole of Israel, to the whole of His church! That means I am always part of a larger group! The moment He began to fulfil this promise in me, in Baptism, I became part of the Israel of God, the Church of God. Whœver is baptised and believes belongs to this Body of Christ. You are not alone anymore, and doing what you want, without considering what the Lord wants and what the church wants, is out of the question! God says, *“And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”* God Gave His spirit to you, to all of us, so that we would begin to walk according to His Will as it is revealed in His Word!

• He didn’t cleanse us to go against Him. His spirit will guide us in His ways which we hear and learn through His Word. Furthermore He says, you will dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers and you shall be my people and I will be your God. As baptised we were baptised into the Body of Christ. This is where our first citizenship is. As newborn Christians we live in Christ. Our only real life we live in Christ.

• Then God also said that He will remove our heart of stone. That begun in Baptism and will be fully completed at our death. When we die our heart of stone will forever be removed from us! Isn’t that tremendous news. But, what does this mean, heart of stone, heart of flesh?

• In the Bible the heart of a person is the centre of his being. It includes the desires and will, the decision-making faculty, the mind and our emotions. Our old hearts of stone have no consideration for God’s Will nor His Word. Our hearts of stone are stone-death to the Word of God. They don’t like to hear His Word. They are hard as stone, they don’t

allow God's Ways into the heart. The heart of stone will not give in to God's Word although it stands corrected by His Word. It wants to go its own way although God's Word clearly speaks against it. It will use a thousand and one excuses not to listen to the clear Word of God. It will refuse because the messenger is a sinner. It will deny the truth of it because what about all the others who are also not doing it or doing it.

- This teaches that God's Word does speak mightily against our old hearts. We cannot expect that God's Word will never clash with our old hearts of stone! That is why God has to accomplish an outright miracle: He has to create something in our hearts, a new heart which will desire, reason, think, and feel like He does. This He creates by uniting us with Christ and Christ starts to teach us using His Word. All of this He does with us in the midst of His congregation. This is where He creates and renews our hearts, the centre of our beings to consider Him, to consider His Ways, to consider the other members of Christ and those outside.

- It all starts with God using our ears to reach our hearts. This is where the real new attitude is made. Here the new year starts, because God is doing his new work! He continues to do His new work wherever we encounter His genuine Word! Wherever we encounter His real Word and Sacrament we encounter Him. That is where our old heart of stone is pulled from us even further, by hearing the Law of God and the new heart grows deeper into us as we hear His Gospel. This is what keeps us alive. This is what keeps us new, although our flesh might turn quite old. A Christian, who is physically old, is in fact more alive and new than a youngster, who has no new heart from God!

- If a congregation is new, according to God's standards, depends only on the fact if God's Word and Sacraments are faithfully handed out to them or not. God's Word and His acts of sharing His Grace, like Baptism, Confession and Absolution, and the Lord's Supper are the means through which God renews our new hearts and keeps us alive! So, the first New Year's resolution, the most worthwhile one would be to say, I will always be where God renews my heart in this coming year!

- God promised to make His grain abundant and the fruit of the tree abundant. This means, His gifts of Grace will always be available in abundance. The congregations might have some financial struggles from time to time, but God's gift of Grace, cleansing us from all uncleanness, renewing our new hearts, will always be available in abundance. There will not be drought or famine with these gifts in God's holy mountain, in the promised land, the Body of Christ!

- As this is what we need for and foremost for a really "New" Year, whatever the world throws at us, it cannot take away the New God has given to us. We have a new future which does not depend on politicians or anything of the world. It depends on God's Word and Work alone. Blessed New Year. **Amen.**

- *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.** [Phil 4,7].*