

First Sunday after Christmas
January 1, 2017
St. Matthew 2:13-23
Kings Cannot Prevent God's Grace
Rev. George Ferch

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

“Is New Year’s Day a religious holiday like Christmas and Easter?” This is the question a writer sent in to the Billy Graham, My Answer column in the Indianapolis Star last Friday. The answer given is that Christmas and Easter are religious holidays and New Year’s Day simply marks the beginning of a new year on our calendar. This is not really accurate for us.

We celebrate January 1 as the Festival of the Name of Jesus. Eight days after his birth, our Savior shed his blood the first time for us under the rabbi’s knife. His parents did as Gabriel told them to do and gave their new son the name that indicated his work, “he will save his people from their sins.”

It is under the banner of Jesus’ circumcision and name that we do begin a new year. God the Father protected his Son so Jesus would be victorious over his enemies. We are certain the Father does the same for us. God is gracious to us every day in Christ and no earthly king or plan can prevent that. This was evident very early in Jesus’ life.

Today may not be as big as Christmas or Easter on the church calendar. It is as big in God’s grace, his plan of our forgiveness and salvation. And, **Kings Cannot Prevent God’s Grace.** Their plans to hinder God must fail. God’s plan must succeed according to plan.

Herod the Great had a plan to prevent God’s grace. Even in his misunderstanding of the nature of the newborn king’s rule, Herod had no intention of seeing it as God’s gracious plan for the people. He was in power and had no intention of giving up that power. After the Magi started home, this tyrant ordered the murder of all males two and under in Bethlehem.

The sadness in that little town was so great, and it fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy. Jacob’s wife, Rachel, was buried near Bethlehem. She represents the entire nation. Just as Rachel wept over the taking of Israel to Babylon in captivity, she wept over the deaths of these first martyrs, this slaughter of the innocents as it also is called.

Kings cannot prevent God’s grace. Their plans to hinder God must fail. An angel had warned Joseph. Joseph obeyed the angel in faith. He had taken Jesus and his mother to Egypt for safe keeping. When Herod died, literally was through or was finished, Joseph brought his little family back not to Bethlehem but to Nazareth up north in Galilee.

This fulfilled two prophecies of Holy Scripture. As God had called Israel, his son, out of slavery in Egypt to inherit the Promised Land, he called back his Son, Jesus, to live and to grow and to be the world’s Redeemer. The Old Testament also had said Jesus would be from Nazareth. What we have here is the answer to David’s question in Psalm 2, “Why do the nations rag and the peoples plot in vain...The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.”

Be sure of this in 2017. Kings cannot prevent God’s grace. Rulers of this world cannot stop God’s plan of salvation for you and for me and for others. Herod could not kill Jesus because Jesus was meant to die on the cross in our place. He did and we have full forgiveness for all of our sins. We know all things work for our good and for the good of the church. There has been a war on Christianity since Jesus was a young child. That war has failed at every turn to date and it will continue to fail. God’s plan must succeed according to plan.

Every event surrounding Jesus' life and death and resurrection, his ascension and rule at his Father's right hand were according to God's plan. God outlined that plan in Old Testament prophecy. Those prophecies are part of God's revealed plan. We see prophecies fulfilled in so many ways here; the Magi, the journey to Egypt, the safe return, the new life in Nazareth; even the failure of the kings of the earth to prevent the Father from installing his king on his holy hill of Zion.

God's plans must succeed according to plan. God does nothing on the spur of the moment. He does nothing that isn't good for us. He leaves nothing undone he said will happen.

At the same time, like Joseph, we must listen to God as he directs us through life, and in the obedience that comes from faith follow those directions. "What ifs" are dangerous in connection with Bible events for sure. But, what if the Magi had not outwitted Herod, or what if Joseph had not listened to the angel? What ifs are useless for us as well.

God has a plan for you. That plan must succeed because it is according to his plan. That plan first and foremost is to take you to heaven because he has covered all your sins in Christ's blood and laid your guilt for those sins on him, and punished him in your stead. We achieve God's plans by faithful use of the gospel in Word and sacrament.

God has plans for us in the regular events of life. Sometimes those plans are obvious, other times, not so much. At times people try to prevent those plans through evil actions or by putting up road blocks of difficult circumstances.

We pray about it. We look for God pleasing avenues to take. We trust God will bless our decisions to take his ways. The threshold of a new year is a marker as we step ahead into the future. Always remember you step ahead under the watchful eye of our gracious God. He has plans for you; plans to prosper and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

On the cover of the building plans for our new addition there is a picture of the finished product. So before you see the diagrams, and drawings, and individual parts, you are able to see how they all fit together and will look upon completion. In fact, do look as those plans came together according to plan.

The Festival of Jesus' name and how the Father delivered his Son from his enemies is the front cover of God's plan for us and how it will turn out. Seeing that on this first day of the year, we proceed through the varied and individual parts of our lives. It will turn out as we expect. We have God's grace. He has built us as living stones into the church. We will arrive into eternal life. Our enemies may try to prevent it all, but God's plan must succeed according to plan. Amen. <SDG>