

Notes from the Sunday Sermon of January 1, 2023:

The Blessings of New Year's Day: God's Gift to Us and Our Gifts to God

Scripture Readings:

Luke 2:20-21, 40

Mark 1:1-8

As God this day gives you a *New Year*, and has not surprised you, nor taken you away in the sins of last year; as He gives you a new year, give him a *New-Year's gift*, *Cor novum*, a new and a Circumcised heart, and *Canticum novum*, a new Song, a delight to magnify His name, and speak of His glory, and declare His wondrous works to all people.

Source: *The Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. 6

Despite the difficulty in getting up early and preparing to attend church when New Year's Day falls on a Sunday, there are also numerous blessings. John Donne in his Sermon presented above notes first of all that in the New Year God, rather than punishing us for our what we did or didn't do over the previous year, presents us with the gift of time – a gift we should never take for granted. We, likewise, should respond by offering two gifts of our own – that of a new and Circumcised heart and a new Song.

1) John Donne, an English poet and priest (who died in 1631), in knowing the Scriptures was aware that New Year's Day – eight days after Christmas – is when in affirmation of His humanity, Jesus was liturgically given His name and was circumcised in fulfillment of the Law:

And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called JESUS, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb (Luke 2:21).

The Saturday evening text for Vespers stated that:

[God] made the Law, and He obeyed His own commands.

But also in knowing the Scriptures, Donne was aware that it was noted in Old Testament as well as by St. Paul that circumcision was not just a physical rite imposed on Jewish young boys, but there was a spiritual significance that had broader implications:

6 And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live
(Deuteronomy 30:6)

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; 29 but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart
(Romans 2:28-29).

So, our first New Year's gift to God involves a changed and open heart.

2) The second gift is that of a new Song by which we magnify His name and speak of His glory. Today is the feast of St. Basil the Great, the fourth century bishop of an area in what is now Turkey. He was known for his theological wisdom, his concerns for social welfare, and for the Anaphora Prayers in the Liturgy we are serving today (and on the Sundays of Great and several other special occasions throughout the year). These Prayers are a tapestry of Biblical images and provide us with the language for singing the story of our salvation.

Today is also the Sunday before the Feast of the Epiphany and we read the opening verses from the Gospel of St. Mark which anticipate the Feast (we'll celebrate with a Vespertal Liturgy on Thursday night). In recognizing Jesus's willingness to identify himself with humanity and to be baptized, we affirm – as the text of the Baptismal Service states – that the one baptized is not just born again, but receives a “life of regeneration,” a lifetime of continually being reborn and renewed by the Spirit.

Within the Divine Liturgy and nearly every other service we hear the petition that we would “complete the remaining time of our life in peace and repentance.” Peace is always the gift provided by and realized in Jesus and repentance is the opportunity to continually grow and change in the understanding of ourselves. They are among the fruits of Baptism.

CONCLUSION: The opportunity to celebrate New Year's Day on a Sunday provides us with several blessings. We receive God's gift of the entrance into new time. With this comes our response in offering to God a new and circumcised heart and a new song. From this transformed heart and with the melody and language of this new song we pursue the Baptismal life of regeneration and look to completing the remainder of our time in peace and repentance.