

“I Am Unworthy”

Why tonight? I know and you know that we are gathered here because it is New Year's Eve. But why is that? In some sense, we might consider this day a bit arbitrary. This happens to be the final day of the calendar year, based on a calendar that first came into use back in 1582. We could celebrate on other days. We could use the church year, and we would have celebrated back on December 1. We could follow the lead of many within the Eastern Orthodox Church and wait until January 14 to celebrate, since that is the day when the previous calendar would have restarted. The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, was back on September 4, and the Chinese New Year will be on January 31.

But according to the calendar in use by the majority of people throughout the world, today is the last day of 2013, and tomorrow is the first day of a new year, 2014. And so, we celebrate. We take a moment on New Year's Eve to look back and to consider the events of the past year. We think a bit on the new opportunities that lie before us. And this evening we are doing that with the help of God's Word in the Bible. We are here to offer our thanks to God for his blessings to us, and to pray that he would be with us to bless us in our new year.

The sermon text that we are using to guide our thoughts does not come from a New Years celebration, but it does come from a time that encouraged similar consideration. It came from a time when Jacob, who spoke the words of our text, was thinking back on many events from his life, and looking ahead to what was coming in his future. As he pondered these things, Jacob prayed these words, which we also join to pray: **“I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant.”**

Our lesson (Genesis 32:1-21) that we read earlier shares some of the context of this prayer, but let's think a little more about the life of Jacob. To appreciate Jacob's position, it is useful first to remind ourselves of his grandfather. That was Abraham. Abraham was the one that God had chosen to be the ancestor of the Savior. He had singled out Abraham and promised to him that all nations on earth would be blessed through his offspring. In order to keep this promise, God blessed Abraham with a son, Isaac. In turn, God gave Isaac two sons, Jacob and Esau.

Jacob was the younger of these twin brothers. Though it was unusual, God had determined that the younger brother would carry on his promise. But instead of trusting God to carry out his plan, Jacob and his mother took things into their own hands. They tricked Isaac and Esau. Jacob stole from his brother the blessing that his father intended to give to him. And Esau was enraged. Fearing for his life, Jacob ran away.

Jacob ended up at the house of his uncle, Laban. There in Laban's house, Jacob worked and became wealthy. He was married. In fact, he was married multiple times. He had several children, through whom God's promise of a Savior would be passed down. Finally, eventually, Jacob determined, or rather God determined for him, that it was time for him to head back home. Our Scripture lesson this evening records a portion of Jacob's trip home.

Like our New Year's Eve celebration, this trip home gave Jacob the opportunity to look back at his life and to look ahead at what was to come. And as he did, he couldn't help but say, “I am unworthy.” Think about it. The very reason he had to leave was that he hadn't trusted God to carry out his promise. Instead, Jacob thought that he needed to lie and deceive and cheat. He hurt his father, he hurt his brother. We would have understood if God decided to punish him in various ways on his trip. But God didn't. Instead, God repeatedly reassured Jacob that he was with him, and that he loved him. God appeared to Jacob in dreams. He blessed Jacob with a family and with flocks. Listen again to how Jacob described how God had blessed him: **“I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups.”** Jacob's household had grown so much that Jacob was able to divide it into two parts, and each part was a large group, not only of people, but also of flocks and herds.

When we look at our own situations, we probably won't be talking about flocks and herds. But we may well be talking about our families, jobs, church, friends, hobbies, food, clothing, houses, and so many more blessings. And our reaction really can't help but be, "I am unworthy." OK, maybe that's not our natural reaction. We like to say, "I worked hard for that. I deserved it." Jacob could have done the same. He worked hard for much of what he had. But he knew that even his hard work and the ability to do it were blessings from God. We ought to realize the same.

And when we acknowledge that none of the good things that are ours, none of the things that have come to us over the past year, have come to us apart from God's blessings, then it becomes clear exactly how unworthy we are. What did we do to convince God to bless us? What did we offer to him so that we would deserve his blessing? If we are honest, we can come up with many more examples of reasons we deserve his punishment, his anger, his disappointment. We have been selfish and petty, unkind and uncaring, dishonest and insincere. We have failed to love God; we have failed to love our neighbors.

And God has responded by blessing us. In Jacob's prayer, he used two appropriate words: kindness and faithfulness. God was loving and kind to him, and God was there, faithfully, through everything that he faced. God has been kind to us. We can trace his kindness in so many ways. We could point to any of his blessings to us. Most importantly, we could point way back to the Christmas blessing we celebrated just last week, that God sent his own Son to be our Savior. And though that blessing came to earth so many years ago, throughout this past year God allowed us many opportunities to hear and to be encouraged by the message of forgiveness through Jesus, and to receive his body and blood in the sacrament of Holy Communion. And God's faithfulness continues to this day. We know and believe that he is and always will be our loving Father.

And yet some of us might be tempted to say, "Well, 2013 was fine, but it wasn't a great year. There were many things that went wrong, and many times that were tough. I'm not even looking forward to 2014 if it's anything like this year has been." If that is the case, my heart goes out to you because of the difficulties that you've been facing. There's no need to sugar coat it or ignore the fact that life can be very difficult. But hidden in all of this is the fact that God is still kind and faithful. He promises that everything, even difficult times, will work out for our good. Sometimes the blessings are more difficult for us to find, but they are there.

And we can look forward to the new year with the confidence that God will continue to bless us. That night in his camp, Jacob prayed not only because he was looking back on his life, but also because he was looking ahead. He had some fears and some apprehensions. He was going to see his brother for the first time after Jacob had treated him so poorly. He didn't know exactly what would happen. But because God had blessed him in the past, as unworthy of it as he was, Jacob looked confidently into the future and asked that God would bless it. And God did. We stopped short of the joyful reunion between Jacob and Esau, but the Bible records how Esau graciously forgave Jacob, and how they greeted each other with kindness, generosity, and love.

Neither you nor I knows exactly what 2014 holds for us. Whether we look days, weeks, months, or a year ahead, we don't know. We may have some ideas. We may have some hopes; we may have some plans. But only God knows.

But we do know this: God has proven faithful to us and kind. Do we expect less of him in the future? God has treated us not as our sins deserved, but with compassion and love and grace. Do we need to worry about anything? Can't we say with the Apostle Paul: **"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"** (Romans 8:32)

No, this doesn't mean that we will always have exactly what we want exactly as we want it. But it does mean that God is faithful. He will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear. He will not stop showering on us his love, his kindness, and his faithfulness. Whether this is the day to celebrate or some other, it doesn't matter. The fact is that whenever we look at how God has blessed us in the past, and whenever we contemplate our futures, we can say with Jacob, **"I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant."** And that is why we celebrate and give thanks to God.