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1/1/2012, The Name of Jesus  
Happy New Year!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>21</sup>And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called *Jesus*, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Happy New Year, everyone! I know that the liturgical calendar counts the First Sunday of Advent, back in November, as the start of the new year. And that is fine. But *today* - January 1 - is also the start of a new year of our Lord, and on this day, I am glad to wish you a Happy New Year!

Our faith is not a dour faith. It is not a downhearted faith. I know that Christians sometimes seem severe and dress out-of-fashion and relate to others in a judgmental way, but such things do not really go to the center of our faith. For in its heart of hearts, the Christian faith agrees with the Christmas angel from long ago -- an angel who spoke of “good tidings” and of “great joy”:

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you *good tidings of great joy*, which shall be to *all people*. (Luke 2:10, KJV)

Therefore, if we are going to be severe or judgmental, we must temper our severity with love and joy, lest we betray our faith. If we ourselves practice piety and simplicity and urge others to do the same, we should try to communicate to them that our advice is carried along on the warm winds of goodwill toward them. We count them as the kind of people Jesus felt worth dying for. We consider them future inheritors of beatitude, future neighbors in eternity. And we think such happy thoughts toward them because our faith is first of all a happy faith. We are happy because we have Jesus! We have him as our sermon hymn just described him: “What a Friend We Have in Jesus!” We have him as our companion as we head off into this new year of our Lord, 2012.

Because Christianity is fundamentally a happy religion, joy should be no stranger to us. Delight in things should come natural to us. So, if you are a Giants fan, for example, then be a fan with all your heart. Go to the game if you can afford it, bundle up against the snow, drink your hot chocolate and roar your approval of the great plays.

Likewise, with your friends. If they are dear to you, let them know it. Do not overlook your loved ones and lose sight of their good points, but take a second look at them and remember how great they are! If you are young and falling in love, cherish your beloved and these good days. Do not let yourself be so preoccupied with work and other things that you fail to recognize how good it is to

be young and in love. And you husbands and wives, no matter what your age, if you two enjoy snuggling with each other, then do so with abandon and joy and whisper a prayer of thanks for your beloved. In this land “east of Eden,” our good Lord has still left us with many reasons for joy, and we should enjoy them with a good conscience if possible.

Buy yourself a red Mustang with stick shift. That’s what Carol and I think about doing someday.

If you like food, then enjoy it with that most wonderful of spices: the hunger that comes with moderation and with charity that remembers the poor, so that when you at last sit down to eat, you are not already full and forgetful of how good food can taste.

Pay attention to your health and fitness, because it is a joy to have good health if you can.

And above all, carry yourself forward into 2012 and onwards with the conviction that you are not alone, but rather have Jesus as your good companion. This year walk with Jesus with even more earnestness, so that you renew your search for piety and joy in the coming year.

## ST. JOHN

Last Sunday, Christmas morning, we lingered with the majestic opening chapter of St. John, along with its elevated doctrine of the Holy Incarnation of our God. But it is interesting to note that when John turns to the daily life of Jesus, he starts the story with a commonplace story of happiness. I mean the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Jesus calls his disciples and the next thing we hear, they all head to a party. Chapter One speaks of the mystery of the Word made flesh. Chapter Two hastens on to a celebration, as if for John, we just don’t get Jesus right unless we understand that he is open to joy on earth. Our Lord Jesus did many miracles, and that is good, because this old world stands in need of some good miracles. The Gospels tell of Jesus healing the lepers, opening the eyes of the blind, unloosing the tongue of dumb, casting our tormenting spirits that caused people to thrash around and cut themselves and to break the hearts of their loved ones. All of these miracles were wondrous and needful things. Yet John does not start with them, but with a miracle of joy at a wedding when he made water into fine wine. And then, as with the other Gospels, John ends with the story with this world’s greatest reason for happiness: the resurrection of Jesus.

All the Bible is united in the conviction that humanity is meant for more than drudgery. It is no departure from our faith for St. Peter, for example, to speak of a great joy appropriate for those who believe in Jesus Christ:

<sup>8</sup>Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with *joy unspeakable and full of glory*: (1 Peter 1:9, KJV)

St. Paul likewise knows of a kind of peace that goes beyond this world's reasons for optimism:

And the peace of God, which *passes all understanding*, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7, RSV)

And many a grey-haired Christian could give the good testimony that walking with Jesus has made all the difference in the world for them, and they regret nothing except that they did not walk that good walk with even more integrity.

## **BAPTISM**

That is my main theme for this New Year's sermon: As we head into this New Year, let us walk with Jesus *like them* -- the saints of old and the saints of nowadays who have few regrets about their companionship with Jesus.

This is the gift of Baptism. Wondrous thought, really: In olden days, Jesus walked along the Sea of Galilee and called fisherman to follow him. He promised to make them fishers of humanity. They followed him. They kept him company. He chose the path, and they walked along with him. They followed him, by fits and starts, sometimes with comprehension, sometimes not getting him at all. They followed him with good intentions, all too often falling short of those intentions. But they continued to walk with him, and in the walking, they became better people. Indeed, in the end, they became apostles, saints, and some of them became martyrs for our Lord. Altogether, they walked with him and became holier people. And that is the great adventure that lies before us this year: This same Jesus who called the disciples of old is resurrected and calls us too. So, we too get to walk with Jesus, and in the walking, to become better. We get to do what disciples do: listen for the word of our Master, and live in light of that word both for our encouragement and our growth in piety in 2012.

## **THE NAME'S BLESSING**

You know Jesus. You know him not simply as an item of history, but as your living Savior and as the great champion who fights at your side.

You know the name "Jesus," and in knowing it, you are blessed. This is the name that "charms our fears," as Charles Wesley put it in his great hymn "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing":

The name of Jesus charms our fears  
and bids our sorrows cease,  
sings music in the sinner's ears,  
brings life and health and peace.

("Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," LBW 559, verse 3)

Not only do we know the name “Jesus,” but also we know what that name means -- what *that good Man* means. He means “Saviour.” That was the message of the angel to Joseph, when he bid Joseph to fear not to take Mary as his wife:

<sup>20</sup>But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. <sup>21</sup>And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for *he shall save* his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:20-21, KJV)

And so it is that this New Year into which we are now walking is better than it seems. Indeed, it is better that we deserve. For we walk into this new year in the company of the Saviour. And that makes this New Year worthy of joy and of renewed dedication to the One whose blessed name we bear, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.