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

Happy New Year, everyone!

Since my open-heart surgery last August, I have found myself praying Martin Luther's "Morning Prayer" with new admiration and earnestness. It is a prayer I have long commended to our Catechism students, and I mean to especially lift it up for my new class this year.

Let me read the prayer aloud for you and then discuss it in this sermon. My theme is that this excellent prayer with which we can start the *day* is also an excellent prayer as we start this new *year* of our Lord 2014.

Luther's "Morning Prayer" is found in his *Small Catechism*. It includes not only the prayer but also other devotions Luther recommends to Christians at the start of each day:

Morning Prayer

*How the head of the family shall teach his household
to say morning and evening prayers*

In the morning, when you rise, make the sign of the cross and say, "In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Then, kneeling or standing, say the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Then you may say this prayer:

"I give Thee thanks, heavenly Father, through thy dear Son Jesus Christ, that Thou hast protected me through the night from all harm and danger. I beseech Thee to keep me this day, too, from all sin and evil, that in all my thoughts, words, and deeds I may please Thee. Into thy hands I commend my body and soul and all that is mine. Let thy holy angel have charge of me, that the wicked one may have no power over me. Amen."

After singing a hymn (possibly a hymn on the Ten Commandments) or whatever your devotion may suggest, you should go to your work joyfully.

Luther has a similar prayer and devotions for the end of the day. The total effect is that the day is framed by the making of the sign of the cross, by the

name of our God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - by a summary of the Gospel - the Creed - and by the Prayer our Lord taught us to pray - the Lord's Prayer. This sequence of devotions is a way of dedicating the day to the Lord.

That's what I think we should do at the start of this new year: we should dedicate this year, 2014, to our God and live this year in gratitude to him.

The structure of this sermon follows the structure of Luther's Prayer. That prayer has three parts: First, thanksgiving for having made it through the night to the start of a new day. Second, petition for protection and purity of life this day too. And third, a final entrusting of ourselves into the mercy of God for this day. Tomorrow we will do the same all over again, day by day.

So, let's take these three themes and apply them, not just to a single day in our life, but to the whole year now stretching before us.

GRATITUDE

First, we express gratitude to God for having made it this far. So, Luther's prayer starts this way:

I give Thee thanks, heavenly Father, through thy dear Son
Jesus Christ, that Thou hast protected me through the night
from all harm and danger.

Such gratitude was much on my mind during our family's recent Christmas Eve supper. Every seat at our dining room table was filled and was filled by someone dear to me, including our sons and their girlfriends. Maybe we will have daughters-in-laws someday. Maybe we will have grandchildren! As I gazed around the table, I thought to myself, "My! I am glad that I lived to see this!"

Now, those words - "I am glad that I have lived to see this" - were not a mere turn of phrase for me. I was literally and genuinely happy to be alive to see our Christmas Eve gathering. In fact, for weeks following my surgery, I was struck with wonder and gratitude each morning when I opened my eyes. I was truly grateful to have made it through the night. At first I was weak as a kitten. And I am not someone who is used to being weak. It was a strange sensation for me to be so weak. Even walking around the block was a shaky proposition. Something clearly had changed in the center of my chest. When I went to sleep each night, I commended myself into the hands of the Lord and hoped I would wake up again in this earthly life, because I have a family and ministry to take care of. And so, when I *did* wake up, I was delighted each morning and glad to say a prayer of gratitude for making it through the night.

Each of us here at Immanuel for this first liturgy of the new calendar year has arrived at this point in life through dangers, some of which are known to us and some of which are unknown. Dangers are the stuff of daily life. Why, just a

couple weeks before my heart surgery, I was nearly run over on my way to lead the chapel service at Carnegie East House. It was mid-afternoon, broad daylight. I was in my clergy black suit, with my white clerical collar and my Communion set in my hand, crossing Second Avenue with the walk light clearly in my favor. But roaring down Second Avenue came a motorcycle gang. They roared right on through their red light, passing on both sides of me. I am glad I stopped walking, else I would have been run over.

Similar dangers, known and unknown, have surrounded *you* this past year. You might think of 2013 as a good year or as a bad year, but one way or the other, you should also think of it as a year of God's grace, for here you are, safe and sound in church. It was not by our own hand, or even the great strength of a horse that we have prevailed, but rather by God's grace that we get to be alive at the start of this new year, 2014. In this morning's prayers we mean to give thanks for the year 2013.

THIS YEAR ALSO

Then, Luther moves on to ask for the Lord's help in the day stretching before him:

I beseech Thee to keep me *this day, too*, from all sin and evil,
that in all my thoughts, words, and deeds I may please
Thee.

We have things we want to accomplish this day. We have good work to do and would like to be able to push our responsibilities on down the road a little farther. But if so, then Luther reminds us that we should pray for God's help this day too, for we live in the midst of dangers, temptations, and frustrations. And behind them all, there is the "wicked one" who wishes to destroy us. So, Luther encourages us to start off each day asking for God's protection.

It is the same thing for us now as we face this New Year. Our congregation, for example, faces the ongoing challenges of taking care of aging facilities. We expect our Roof Project to begin this springtime. It is an immense project. We do well to pray for that project and for the safety of every worker on that project or other projects throughout our city. As Luther says, we ask that the Lord will "keep us" this day and this year too.

It is the same thing for each one of us. I hope this coming year is your best year! I hope that your hopes and dreams come true. I hope that you are spared illness or accident or setbacks or heartaches. And so we do well to pray about these things. We do well to pray that the Lord will keep us each one during this New Year, 2014.

GOD'S MERCY

Finally, Luther turns from petition to self-surrender. He has given thanks for the night before. He has asked for protection in the day ahead of him. Now he entrusts himself to the Lord. It is as if the business of thinking is done. He has thought of the dangers behind him and the dangers ahead of him. Now, he is done with thinking and he turns to trusting and resting in the Lord:

Into thy hands I commend my body and soul and all that is mine. Let thy holy angel have charge of me, that the wicked one may have no power over me. Amen.

Once he has done this, he is ready to go. And so he ends his morning instructions with these happy words:

...you should go to your work joyfully.

At the end of the day, he has similar happy counsel for us. After thanking the Lord for the day just gone by, petition for protection in the nighttime, and commending himself into God's mercy, Luther says that all that remains is a good night of sleep:

Then quickly lie down and sleep in peace.

CHRIST'S EXALTATION

Let me conclude this sermon with the chief thing. Let me conclude by telling you *why* we may go to our work joyfully and may lie down at the end of the day and sleep in peace. Saint Paul gives us our great reason for confidence as we face this day and as we face this coming year: It is because of the exaltation of our Savior Jesus Christ. Let me read again for you for this morning's Epistle Lesson, from Philippians 2:

⁹Therefore God has highly *exalted* him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
(Philippians 2:9-11, RSV)

God did this. He exalted the One who lived among us humbly, righteously, and loving people to the end. We are united to him through our baptisms. We

are entrusted to him, laid in his arms, inducted into his discipleship, welcomed into the apostolic community, made members of the Body of Christ of which he is the Head.

And if he be the Head, and if he be exalted, we cannot be too far behind him, for where the Head is, there must the Body go too. Little us! But we have a mighty leader, who has been exalted from every suffering and every heartbreak this world can now. When we commend ourselves into *his* hands, whether for this one day, January 1st, or for the year stretching before us, we are entrusting ourselves to the faithful and exalted one, and he means to be with us this year too. And to him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.