

January 1, 2023

Numbers 6:22-27

Psalm 67: 2-3, 5, 6, 8

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21

Before we begin, may I extend a heartfelt blessing for a Happy and Redemptive New Year?

Unfortunately, there are many who predict a variety of negative forecasts for the next year. They anguish and worry about the economy, the elections, the stock market, and the threat of war. Sadly, it is easy to get caught up in a whirlwind of bad news and before long we too are down in the dumps.

Consequently, when we take our eyes off the Lord, we compromise our creative receptivity to the Holy Spirit, and then like an airplane that has lost its power, we stall out and without proper correction plummet towards the ground crashing in despair with negative self-talk.

Not that we should bury our heads in the sand and/or try to ignore the events happening in our world; but let's be mindful as to not allow a negative attitude to sway our opinions concerning God and His divine purposes for His people.

So then as a precautionary remedy, may I suggest that we simply stop listening to everyone else's rhetoric; and instead, listen to what the Lord is telling us? Think about it, this world is not our home. In reality, we are merely pilgrims passing through these times. Thankfully, we serve an awesome King who guides and talks with us every day in the Bibles we study, the prayers we pray, the

devotions we read, the piety we practice, and the sacraments we receive. Indeed, His grace comes to us in many forms.

The fact is, this year not only has the potential to be a good year, but it also has the potential to be a great year. Oh we will all have our personal struggles, I am sure. Yet, the Scriptures assure us in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Here saint Paul teaches us that no matter what problem may come our way, God will help us endure the resultant trials.

However, all things aside, we still need to wake up each day and renew our trust in the Lord. No matter what happens this coming year, I want to be found faithful to God, listening to the Holy Spirit, and doing what the Lord has asked me to do in His kingdom.

So, as we begin yet another year let us be grateful for the opportunities set before us, and then let us be diligent and faithful to live and work as if He were to return at any moment.

So once again Happy New Year and welcome to the first day of the year 2023. Today being the first day of the Civil Year, you may have noticed in our Missal that many Western Catholics celebrate January 1<sup>st</sup> as the Solemnity of Mary the Holy Mother of God. In regards to this day, which by the way has been officially celebrated since the seventh century, the Catechism points out,

Mary, the all-holy ever-virgin Mother of God, is the masterwork of the mission of the Son and the Spirit in the fullness of time. For the first time in the plan of salvation and because his Spirit had prepared her, the Father found the

dwelling place where his Son and his Spirit could dwell among men. (721).

While the Western Church continued to celebrate the Solemnity of Mary the Holy Mother of God, the Eastern Orthodox Catholics, since the early eighth century, have observed this day as the “Feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord.”

The Gospel reading for today is taken from the writings of St Luke. Noteworthy here is that the information presented in Luke’s gospel was quite possibly given to him firsthand by the Virgin Mary. Thus, he closes with a reminder that eight days after the baby was born, Joseph and Mary named him Jesus, and then had him circumcised according to Jewish tradition.

In doing so, they observed the Jewish custom where all male infants are named and then circumcised as a sign of the eternal covenant between God and Abraham and the future nation of Israel. Here again we recall that the word Israel simply means “the people of God.”

In giving Abram the commandment for circumcision, God blessed and bestowed upon him a new name - Abraham. With the Jews, the giving of a name came with a spiritual significance, it meant that the person belonged to the people of God. Therefore, the giving of the name Jesus followed by the title “the Christ” has an even loftier significance: it is an assertion of His mission as Savior of the world.

Thus, His circumcision wholly identified him with mankind and especially to those who would dedicate themselves to observe the commandments and obey the Laws of the God of Israel.

When our Lord, in the rite of circumcision submitted to the cutting of his flesh, and the first shedding of His blood, He at that point began His initial suffering work as the Redeemer, a work that would reach its highest point of generosity in His Passion and Death.

Eastern Orthodox author and priest Fr. Thomas Hopko, in his book *The Winter Pascha* reminds us, “He [Jesus] submits to the high priest's knife, enduring the sign of complete submission to God, the act which expresses the total helplessness and weakness of unholy creatures before their Holy Creator. Words cannot convey the condescension of the Lord in His willingness to be circumcised. It is an act of self-emptying humiliation which is wholly ineffable.”

Is it any wonder that St. Paul would be inspired to write, “Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8).

Here we begin to realize the significance of the Incarnation; Jesus was willing to be born of a virgin woman, submit to sacred Tradition in fulfillment to the Law of Moses, and then endure the pain of a Priest’s circumcision knife. Through it all, Mary, who in her very acts of obedience, came to represent the Church and all who would willingly bend their knee to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, Redeemer, and King.

Indeed His Incarnation and His Circumcision, the fact that the King of kings was miraculously born to a young virgin ought to give us

hope for a prosperous New Year in that God has chosen to personally align himself with you and with me.

Indeed, we have hope because even though life has its difficult twists and turns, St. Paul encourages us, "For in [Jesus] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in Him, Who is the head of all rule and authority. In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, [which is your baptism] by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:9-11).

Truly, God has blessed us beyond all measure.

With these thoughts of blessings, let us turn our attention for a moment before we close to the first reading, which comes from the Old Testament Book of Numbers. This reading is very important because it provides a historical and a theological foundation for the hope we have in Christ Jesus, including His birth, His circumcision, and our baptism into His Presence.

Many are familiar with this morning's OT passage and will recognize it as the beginning of the Aaronic blessing; "May the Lord bless you and keep you," found in Numbers 6:24.

I did some research concerning this OT blessing, subsequently, I would like to share the following information from author Jeff A Benner and his website, *The Ancient Hebrew Research Center* <http://www.ancient-hebrew.org>. I hope you will be as moved in regard to his summation as was I. Mr. Brenner states,

The words "bless" and "keep" are abstract words, which we are familiar with in English. But, the ancient Hebrew

people were concrete thinkers who related all things to concrete ideas.

The Hebrew word for "bless" is "*barak*" which literally means, "to kneel". A *berakah* is a "blessing" but more literally, the bringing of a gift to another on a bended "knee". When we bless God or others, we are in essence, bringing a gift to them on a bended "knee."

The Hebrew word for "keep" is "*shamar*," which literally means, "to guard". A related word is "*shamiyr*," which means "thorn". When the shepherd was out in the wilderness with his flock, he would construct a corral of thorn bushes as a guard to protect the sheep from predators.

So, taking what we have learned thus far about these Hebrew words - we can now read the beginning of the Aaronic blessing as follows:

Yahweh will kneel before you presenting gifts and [He] will guard you with a hedge of protection, Yahweh will illuminate the wholeness of his being toward you bringing order, and he will beautify you, and Yahweh will lift up his wholeness of being and look upon you and he will set in place all you need to be whole and complete.

The wording of this wonderful and historical blessing ought to warm our hearts, but there is even more power associated with this affirmation.

It is also reported in Ancient Jewish Tradition that when the Priest would pronounce the Aaronic blessing, the people would all bow their heads and lower their eyes because when the Priest raised his hands, and placing them together to pronounce the blessing, the glory of the Lord would shine through his hands onto the people.

In essence the same glorious power is re-presented each Sunday when during the Mass the priest places His hands over the presented gifts of bread and wine and asks for the Holy Spirit to overshadow the altar – sacramentally and theologically we in faith believe that Almighty God comes on bended knee presenting gifts of protection, wholeness of being, and sets in place all we need to be whole and complete.

Therefore, as we celebrate in the Eucharist this morning, let us remember the blessing spoken by the High Priest Aaron,

Yahweh will kneel before you presenting gifts and He will guard you with a hedge of protection, Yahweh will illuminate the wholeness of his being toward you bringing order and he will beautify you, Yahweh will lift up his wholeness of being and look upon you and he will set in place all you need to be whole and complete.

What better way to usher in a New Year than to once again participate in this most joyous mystery of the Incarnation and then receive the glorious gift of His Most Precious Body and Blood, Soul, and Divinity – the Lord Jesus Christ.

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