

**+ Psalm 90:1/Matthew 28:20/Revelation 21:3-4 + In the New Year, Lord, Abide with Me! +  
+ New Year's Eve + 31 December 2008 +**

It's finally coming to an end. The minutes and hours of 2008 are slipping away, "**fleeting**" as we sang in the last hymn. Most people are happy to see 2008 disappear into history. What a year it's been! Natural disasters hit the Far East, while hurricanes battered the Southeast. Scandals and corruption were exposed from Alaska to Wall Street. Banks and businesses went under with government trying to bail them out. Many lost their homes to foreclosure and more businesses cut jobs. Wars and rumors of wars flared up, while it became more challenging to be a conservative Christian around the world. We had a historic election and Olympic success.

What a year it's been! We saw our congregation get younger and grow, but with the rest of our synod, financial challenges loom on the horizon. We heard the good news of Christ born, crucified and risen. We welcomed young and old into God's family through the waters of Holy Baptism, while another soul entered the glories of heaven. We joyfully received Christ's forgiveness at his Table and here in worship.

2008 was a difficult year. At times, it seemed to have more challenges than successes, more sorrows than joys. Few people are sad to see the year go, and much about 2008 makes people leery about 2009. No matter how you might feel about the New Year, however, our prayer this night is a simple and familiar one—**IN THE NEW YEAR, LORD, ABIDE WITH ME!**

**"Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations."** So Moses begins Psalm 90. Moses knew very well how the Lord had been the "**dwelling place**" or literally, the "**refuge**" of his people during every generation. We don't know when Moses wrote these words, but it was likely during the forty years of wandering with the Israelites in the wilderness. From the moment God had called him from a burning bush to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, Moses had seen how much the Lord cared for his people and what he accomplished for them.

Moses had seen the Lord leave powerless one of the greatest empires in ancient history. With ten supernatural plagues, God had brought mighty Egypt to its knees and freed his people. The Lord delivered them by making it possible to cross the Red Sea on foot, before destroying Egypt's army. The Lord fed two million people well in one of the most barren wildernesses in the Middle East for over forty years. He provided victory over their enemies and discipline when his people needed it. He eventually brought them into the rich land he had promised to their forefathers. His gracious and loving presence didn't end with the miraculous crossing into the Promised Land, but God remained faithful to his people, even when they were not. He remained faithful for centuries. Even when he allowed Israel and Judah to be destroyed for their wickedness, still the Lord remained faithful to his faithful people in exile and long after he brought them home. **"Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations."**

Every generation of God's faithful people have been able to look back on the past year or decade or generation or century or millennium to see one constant. No matter how things changed, the Lord was ever-present.

That was most obvious when 1400 years after Moses, a son was born to a virgin named Mary. When God took on our humanity, he was to have a certain name—**Immanuel, "God with us"**. With the coming of the Christ Child, God's faithful, loving presence came in the flesh. When God took on our humanity, he proved that the true God would always be with his people.

There was God lying in a manger. There was God cradled in Mary's arms. There was God receiving Simeon's praise. There was God living a perfect life as a kid, a tween, a teen, an adult. There was God proclaiming his good news of forgiveness, healing the sick, raising the dead and living among us. There was God suffering blows and ridicule and an excruciating death on a cross. There was God, whose human body was placed in a tomb, leaving that tomb three days later. There was God saying, **"Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."** Jesus has never left his people.

When times get difficult, as they so often have in the past year, we're often tempted to wonder where God and his gracious presence have been. He's there, but he sometimes seems so far away. At times like that, does he allow us to fend for ourselves? Why allow such difficulties, such challenges, such sorrows, such suffering to happen to his faithful people? At times like that, we're quick to cry out, **"O Lord, abide with me!"**

When Moses sang, **"Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations"**, he had seen his share of difficulty and woe and suffering and sorrow. If you read further in Psalm 90, he gives a very real picture of how sinful and mortal we are, how we deserve that God wipe us out like a hot desert wind blowing over green grass, how our years are limited. It's likely that by the time Moses wrote these words, he already knew he would not enter the Promised Land because he had publicly disobeyed God's command. Moses knew we endure suffering and difficulty and sorrow and woe because we are sinful and we live in a sinful world. God's faithful people will not have a life of pure joy and happiness and ease, since we, too, are sinful and daily deal with the effects and consequences of sin. In spite of our sin, however, Moses sings, **"Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations."**

God has been faithful to us in the past as well. He has been faithful with his gracious presence from the beginning. He was there when our congregation was founded. He was there during the ups and downs of our first decades. He was still there when we lost our pastor and throughout the challenging years of vacancy. He was there when we restarted and he's been with us throughout the nearly four years since then, even when we've had challenges and difficulties placed before us. He's been with us when loved ones left this vale of tears and when new life began. He's been with us and will always be with us, even if 2009 is more difficult than the old year.

Why has he been so gracious with us all this time? Remember Immanuel's promise! **"Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."** That promise was sealed with blood on the cross of Calvary and an empty tomb on Easter. That promise includes not just his constant presence, but his grace, his mercy, his forgiveness for when we're not faithful to him.

It is with that promise that we sing that hope-filled, rock-solid prayer, **"Abide with me; fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide. When other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me!"** In that hymn we express confidence in our gracious God, our blessed Savior Jesus Christ, our **"dwelling place"**, our **"refuge"**—the Help of the helpless, the Friend of sinners. We express our sure and certain confidence in the One who will not change and who will be our foundation and shield, even if all of hell breaks loose.

Therefore, in all situations, we can pray (and know that prayer will be answered!), **"Lord, abide with me!"** When faced with economic difficulties or the undependable nature of people or disaster of any kind, **"Lord, abide with me!"** When circumstances spin out of our control, **"Lord, abide with me!"** When death rears its ugly head in our lives or that of a loved one, **"Lord, abide with me!"** When temptation seeks to bring us down or guilt threatens to crush us, **"Lord, abide with me!"** When change and decay are in all around I see, **"Lord, abide with me!"**

What's remarkable about that prayer, though, is that our gracious God has never left us and never will. In the Second Lesson, we were reminded of that as a voice loudly proclaimed the promise we need to hear at every New Year celebration, **"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."** All the sorrow and the difficulty and the challenges and the woe of this life will not compare to that time when we will enjoy the loving presence of God for all eternity. That picture reminds me of my favorite verse of "Abide with Me"—the last verse. It is a fitting prayer for us tonight. **"Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes; Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies. Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee; In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!"** Amen.