

+ Psalm 116:5-7 + The LORD Has Been Good to You + New Year's Eve + 31 December 2014 +

It's not always easy to take a real, honest look at the past. Doing so can be quite depressing, frustrating, even painful. Take an honest look back at 2014 and what do you see? Do you see a polar vortex and heavy lake-effect snow? Tornadoes and earthquakes, hurricanes and droughts? Russians marching into portions of Ukraine, the Islamic State murdering innocent people, including many Christians, or racial protest and violence across our country? Plane crashes and Ebola and death? Do you see increasing hostility against Christians and attacks on God's Word?

You see trouble and hardship. You see frustration and sadness and pain. You see grief over lives cut short and the loss of aged loved ones. You see wickedness and violence and heartlessness as the hearts of many grow dark and cold to the warm light of Christ. You see believers fall prey to temptation and Satan try to thwart the efforts of God's Church. You rightly wonder if all this sad, bad, depressing news points to Christ coming back soon—and it does, as he has promised, but is that all you see when you take a real, honest look at 2014 or is there more?

When the Psalmist looked back on his own life as he wrote Psalm 116, he had a lot of sad, bad, depressing memories too. In a verse before our text, he describes a most terrifying memory. ***"The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow."*** (116:3) Things were pretty bad for the Psalmist. Things had gotten so bad that all he could do was cry out for mercy and help from the Lord. He was entangled in the trap of death. Thrashing around, like a trapped animal, would've only made things worse. Anguish and sorrow and trouble had overcome him and filled his heart with fear. He had no escape, except in the Lord. So he called on the saving name of the Lord of free and faithful grace, ***"O LORD, save me!"*** (116:4) And then...God rescued him.

The Psalmist could've looked back on those awful days and could easily have been filled with sorrow and worry and fear, but in all that had happened, he still looked back and praised the Lord of grace. ***"The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The LORD protects the simplehearted; when I was in great need, he saved me. Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you."*** As the final hours of 2014 slip away into history, let's look back with the Psalmist on the past year and see not just the sad and the bad, but this beautiful, glorious truth—**THE LORD HAS BEEN GOOD TO YOU.**

As you look back on the past year, you'll see that alongside those difficult and sad and frustrating times, the Lord has been bountiful in his goodness—even in ways you did not expect. Even in those difficult times, the Lord of free and faithful grace has been "good" in his love for you.

"The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion." In one sentence, the Psalmist puts the jewel of God's love on display. So how has the Lord blessed you with his love in the past year? He has put a roof over your head, food on your table, clothes on your back, and has granted some form of income, but he's done more.

He's given you air to breathe, sunshine and rain, gravity to keep your feet firmly planted, and the breath of life in your body, but he's done more. He's provided you with family and friends and a spiritual family here at Cross of Christ. He's given you faith in him through his Gospel in Word and Sacraments and strengthens that faith as you hear and read his Word, as you remember your Baptism in repentance, and as you receive the Lord himself with bread and wine in his Holy Supper, but he's done even more.

He's given you forgiveness and life, peace and joy and mercy through your Savior Jesus Christ. He's done all that, even though you have not deserved any of it. Look back on the past year and see all those times when your sinful nature took control and moved you to indulge in temptation and sin. Look back on the past year and see how often you've fallen short of God's holiness. Look back and see how often you've opposed God's holy will and followed your own. Look back and see how undeserving you are of God's gracious blessing and how deserving you are of his condemnation.

Yet look back and see how God forgave you through Jesus, how you heard that forgiveness declared by your pastor week in and week out, how you recalled your Baptism and drowned your sinful nature again in repentance, how you received God's forgiveness in his Holy Supper. Look back and see how God was gracious to you in the past year extending your time of grace, strengthening your faith, and giving you opportunities to serve him.

That undeserved love is perfect love—perfect love that moved God to send his Son to rescue you, to pay the full price for your sins. That love is a holy love that punished your Savior for your sin and overcame death for

your life. That holy love demonstrated itself in the tender mercy and compassion of our God, who wanted you to be with him in glory forever and who now pours out his blessing in ways and when you least expect it.

Look back on the past year and amidst the sad and bad, the doom and gloom, the depressing and the frustrating, see how God's undeserved, perfect, tender love has shown you grace upon grace throughout the year.

There were challenging times in the past year—challenges for families and couples and individuals, challenges for our own congregation. At the beginning of this year, we wondered if all our work here at Cross of Christ was going to be in vain. Would our little congregation in Watertown have to scale back its work? Would our building project ever get started? Would our congregation keep growing? Would we ever be able to do all that financially? Families, including our Cross of Christ family, lost loved ones. Believers dealt with crises and painful issues and unexpected challenges.

Even then, the Lord of free and faithful grace was there for those who trust in him. ***“The LORD protects the simplehearted; when I was in great need, he saved me.”*** Individually or as families, the Lord dried our tears with comfort. He filled the emptiness of our sorrow with the joy of his grace. He protected us from the attacks of the Evil One, especially those attempts to make us stop trusting that the Lord is in control of all things and that his timing, unlike ours, is perfect. The Lord delivered his people and blessed us in ways we could not have imagined when we entered 2014.

Cross of Christ-North became Redemption Ev. Lutheran Church with their own faithful pastor. At what seemed like the 11th hour, the Lord enabled us to build by providing the financing we need to make it happen, and the Lord blessed us with unimagined, undeserved growth. Children were baptized and new faces joined us. Families were connected with Jesus and his Word through our congregation. Even our outreach work bore unexpected fruit.

The Lord of free and faithful grace in his own perfect time rescued us and delivered his people who trust in him. In love, he rescued us through our Savior Jesus Christ. In love, he rescued us as a congregation. In love, he rescued us from the attacks of Satan and our sinful natures with the peace and comfort and strength and wisdom that only he can give. The Lord of free and faithful grace has been bountiful in blessing us in the past year.

Taking an honest look at the past year, we have to admit that the Lord in his love has poured out grace upon grace on us as believers, on our families, and on our congregation. So how does that impact how you look at the future? In just a few short hours, 2014 will be history. How did the Psalmist look to the future after the Lord had delivered him? ***“Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.”***

Yes, there will be sorrow and hardship, frustration and difficulty, grief and wickedness in the future. Those things are always part of the life of a Christian and a Christian congregation, but you need not be afraid. You need not be filled with worry or concern. Instead, like the Psalmist, look ahead to the future with peace. The Lord of free and faithful grace has been good to you and will never fail you. He is greater than all the sorrow, hardship, frustration, difficulty, grief, and wickedness in the world. He himself has said, ***“I have overcome the world.”*** (John 16:33) So be at peace as you enter 2015 resting in the everlasting, loving arms of your Savior.

Look ahead to the future with thanksgiving. The Lord of free and faithful grace has richly blessed us not just in the past year, but from the moment our lives began, especially since he brought us to faith in him. His grace is abundant and undeserved, holy and compassionate. He will watch over us and guide us. He will care for us and protect us.

So look forward to the future with real joy—not only because the Lord of free and faithful grace is in control and will guide all things for your good, but also because you have forgiveness and life in Jesus. Look forward with confidence—that childlike trust that clings to God's promises, that cries out to him in need, that knows beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Lord will deliver you and one day bring you to the glories of heaven. With confident joy and thankful peace, gladly proclaim, ***“Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.”*** He has been, is now, and always will be. Praise the Lord for his everlasting grace! Amen.