

✧ *In the Name of Jesus* ✧

YESTERDAY Since we are spiritual beings, here's a great spiritual exercise to do at the turn of the year. It's a challenge. Take out your concordance or open your favorite digital Bible, and read all the passages with the word "yesterday." It sounds like a lot, but there are only eight passages with the word "yesterday" in the translation we usually use. If eight passages is not enough of a challenge, look for all the passages with the word "past"—there's 48 of them. If you want still more challenge, there are another 48 passages with the word "ago." When you take up this challenge, you may notice that these Bible passages about "times past" usually have one of two themes. They point either to some wrong done by a person, or to some right done by God or a good thing God has promised to do.

Looking back at "yesterday" from this same spiritual point of view, we'd have to say: things have not changed much. Since very early in history, when has there ever been a time that some person was not doing some wrong? And how did the Lord handle the situation? On occasion, when people consistently refused to do what was right, he did put them out of his sight. But most of the time, God was good and gracious. In mercy he called them to repentance, and then he showed that he is compassionate and forgiving and faithful. And he was there.

"*Look to Abraham and Sarah,*" our Old Testament lesson urges (Isaiah 51:1-6). Those two are excellent examples of how gracious the Lord is toward his people who fail to do what is right. But Abraham and Sarah lived a long, long time ago. So consider your more recent spiritual ancestors. Who taught you the ways of the Lord? Your parents or grandparents? An uncle or an aunt or an older sibling? A friend? Some of you are remembering your pastors and teachers. Whoever taught you is your ancestor-in-the-faith, your very own Abraham and Sarah, "*the rocks from which you were hewn.*" Look how gracious the Lord was with them! And notice: he was there.

Now look at your yesterdays from this past year, your sorrows and your joys, your tears and your triumphs. What do you notice about each incident? Jesus Christ was there by your side! Just last week, on one of our more recent yesterdays, Jesus was there when we celebrated his first coming to be among us—God taking on human flesh to save us from sin. And in our first Gospel for tonight, we heard how Jesus, risen from the dead, did the same thing for his disciples as he did for us Sunday by Sunday throughout this past year: he took the time to open the Scriptures. He showed us his place in history and the importance of his suffering and rising for our future. "*You are witnesses of these*

things,” he told them (Luke 24: 48). We know these things about Jesus to be true. Therefore we also are witnesses. The turning of the year reminds us of something important from our past that we can share with everyone, something that didn't change: Jesus Christ was there for us, on every yesterday! Jesus Christ, the same YESTERDAY.

TODAY The turning of the year is an appropriate time to pause and consider “TODAY.” After all, on New Year's Eve we can spend so much time looking back, remembering the past, perhaps wishing it were here again... And we can spend so much time looking forward to what we yearn for and hope for, to the goals that we have set for our personal growth... that we overlook TODAY.

But think about it: of the three—yesterday, today, and tomorrow—TODAY is the only one we really have. Yesterday was certainly God's gift, but now it's behind us, and irretrievably so. Only the memories, aided by pictures and video, and the lessons we hopefully learned can be brought forward to the present. And the future is not yet here, therefore it is not yet ours. If God, in his wisdom and mercy, decides not to give us tomorrow, TODAY will be the last of God's present gifts to us. TODAY is the only time in which we live. I don't know who said it first, but they were right, “Life's too short...,” meaning too short

to get bogged down in bickering, pessimism, carousing, and other behaviors that are not only destructive, but sinful in God's sight. Life is lived one second at a time, and you only have 86,400 of those seconds to live each time it becomes a new TODAY. Thank God not only for each moment of life—a terrific gift all by itself—but praise him also that you know and believe in Jesus as the one who redeemed every last TODAY. And then glorify him for making clear to us what we are to do with our TODAY. TODAY is the time to repent, to believe, to recommit, to trust, to bear witness, to love, to forgive, and to do all this to God's glory! I can't think of a better way to spend our last TODAY of 2020 than gathered virtually to hear his Word or gathered together in God's house to hear his Word and receive his Sacrament.

In all of these things, please notice, Jesus Christ is here! “Pastor, you mean he's here in the Bible story we read from Luke's ancient Gospel, right?” No, he's really here. “Pastor, you mean Jesus is up in the sky somewhere on his throne watching us and watching out for us, right?” No, he's really here, as Immanuel, God with us, right here, right now, TODAY. We might feel silly or irreverent doing so, but we could all say, “Hi ya, Jesus!” And if he wanted us to hear his actual voice, he could say back, “Hello, all my dear brothers and sisters.” He's here with us now, God with us,

Immanuel. So when you pray, don't just think of your prayers going a long distance, all the way to that faraway throne of his grace. Talk to your Savior as if he is face to face with you. He said, "*I am with you always*" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus Christ is the same TODAY.

FOREVER Let's do a little verbal exercise, shall we? Notice the pattern and tell me the next item. Are you ready? 3,6,9, what's next? Yes, 12. Good. Let's try another. Monday, Tuesday, what's next? Yes, Wednesday. Good. Let's try another. Yesterday, today, what's next? Normally we would expect the next word to be "tomorrow." But when the Holy Spirit caused Hebrews 13:8 to be written, perhaps he compared "tomorrow" with "forever" and realized that "forever" is much bigger than "tomorrow." So the passage reads: "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and FOREVER.*" As blessings go, "forever" far outlasts and outshines all our tomorrows. And yet "tomorrow"—each tomorrow as it arrives—is a gift of God, not to be despised, but to be anticipated, planned for, welcomed as a blessing from the Lord.

But what if the Lord were not the lord of your heart? Tomorrow could be scary. And FOREVER? How could you handle that with any certainty? For instance, consider the hours of daylight which are

now beginning to increase again since December 21. Imagine being so poorly educated about things that you were afraid the sun might continue sinking lower and lower in the sky each day until it disappeared forever, rather than reaching the solstice and then beginning to rise day by day again, as it actually does. Some of you might say, "Aw, come on. How could anyone be so foolish?" But people are gullible. They will naturally believe almost anything—except the one thing that is difficult for unbelievers to believe: that they are completely sinful and that Jesus rescued them from sin. Believing God's message of sin and grace takes a special miracle of the Holy Spirit. Look how many people consult horoscopes to find out what's going to happen tomorrow. Look how many "annual prediction shows" pop up every year in the media. People want to know what the future holds. They fear bad days, and they want only good days. So they try to peek into the tomorrow that God has hidden from us for our good. Bottom line? There is a part of everyone that doesn't trust God. Many don't know God's promise to Noah after the flood, that "*As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease*" (Genesis 8:22). But since then any believer who learned this early promise of God never had to worry that the sun would continue to dip lower and lower in the sky after December 21. And any believer who

learns that God will turn all things into our good (Romans 8:28) never has to consult a horoscope, never has to worry about any part of FOREVER.

Is there anything wrong with being interested in the future? No. God himself teaches us to think about the future by revealing in the Bible what he has planned for us in the future. But there's a limit to what he is willing to let us know. That's why all prophecy about the future is hard to pin down precisely. God lets only the general truths come through loud and clear. We already know from Holy Scripture: in the future it's going to get tougher for us believers. But we also know God will help us, and he will rescue us in his own way and at his own time, probably after some suffering. So remain faithful to Jesus no matter what (Rev 2:10), especially in those final few days of your life here. Since God limits our view of the future, we ought to limit ourselves to the same extent. He has already told us enough about tomorrow and FOREVER. Trust God. Then, if you want to read or watch the "annual predictions," do so with an eye toward planning how you might share what you know about Jesus with others.

And when fear thrusts its ugly face into your thoughts on the future, give it the boot. We may not know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future. He is our good and gracious God, our

Friend, our Shield, our Helper. There is no need to fear any part of FOREVER because we know how faithful Jesus has been to us in the past. There is no need to fear any part of FOREVER because we can see how our Savior is dealing with us in the present. There is no need to fear any part of FOREVER because we know what our Lord promises about the future. Psalm 56:11 says, "*In God I trust. I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?*"

But the best reason to be confident as we face our FOREVER is that Jesus Christ is there! He who fulfilled the past for us by living each "today" in the presence of God—including that "today" on which he gave up his life... He who rose from the dead, who lives and reigns eternally, offers us a FOREVER filled with blessings too good to describe fully. But this much Jesus explained to Nicodemus: "*Whoever believes in [me] shall not perish*"—even when all our earthly tomorrows have come to an end—"*shall not perish, but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). We know it is so. The One who was there from the beginning and is here with us now is also waiting to receive us once again. The years change as time goes by, but "*Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today and FOREVER*"! In Christ we're ready for 2021.