

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
New Year's Day, January 1, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)
Hymns: 16, 237:1, 118, 120, 47
Lessons: 1 Samuel 7:1-14, Romans 1:1-7, John 1:14-18.
Sermon Text: 1 Samuel 7:12c.
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

"Thus far has the LORD helped us." (1 Samuel 7:12c NIV)
"Hitherto hath the LORD helped us." (1 Samuel 7:12c KJV)

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

This is a time for looking back and looking ahead. It is a time for realizing that our blessings are undeserved because we have sinned and deserve only God's anger. It is a time to remember the pardoning grace of our God which enables us to cross over into the new year with a clean slate.

You heard in our Old Testament lesson that God helped the Israelites again. After all the wickedness they had shown in words, deeds, and even thoughts, both in the wilderness and while coming into the promised land, God still helps them.

And so it is with us. God has helped us again. Not with just a few hours work, the way we might help a friend here on earth. Not with just one day's worth of labor, but with everything, every day, and at this time of year we look back at how God helped us throughout the entire last year.

At the end of the year we could look back and ask – for example – how many days did I go without food? How many days did I not have clothing, or a roof over my head? And how about health? Oh, yes, many of us have had to bear many aches, pains and sorrows, but the fact that you are here today shows that you are not immobilized in a hospital room somewhere. With the hymn writer we could surely say:

**The Lord hath helped me hitherto
By His surpassing favor;
His mercies every morn were new,
His kindness did not waver.
God hitherto hath been my Guide,
Hath pleasures hitherto supplied,
And hitherto hath helped me.** The Lutheran Hymnal, 33:1.

Did you notice that the writer even included the idea that the Lord has supplied pleasures for us? Think for a moment of all the pleasures God has provided for us! God did all this – and more – because of his surpassing favor, his grace, his mercies. And there's another hymn that begins

**Every morning mercies new
Fall as fresh as morning dew;
Every morning let us pay
Tribute with the early day;
For Thy mercies, Lord, are sure,
Thy compassion doth endure.** The Lutheran Hymnal, 537:1.

We surely must never forget that

“HITHERTO HATH THE LORD HELPED US.”

- 1. God helped his people in the Old Testament – even though they didn’t deserve it.**
- 2. God helps his people today – even though they don’t deserve it.**

You heard God tell us in our Old Testament lesson “*Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far has the LORD helped us."*

This happened several chapters after the Philistines had captured the ark of God, the ark of the covenant. But because of their wicked deed, God visited them with misfortunes. The statue of their god, Dagon, kept toppling over because the ark of God was in the same temple. People got tumors, or boils, or ulcers, and rats apparently were ravaging their country. So they sent the ark back to the Israelites. Samuel the prophet gathered the people together to repent and offer sacrifices at Mizpah. The Philistines heard the Israelites were gathered and then attacked them. But God rescued his people and then conquered the Philistines. *"While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car."* 1 Samuel 7:10-11

But what had God’s people done up until this time to deserve this kind of goodness? Well, years before this, God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and they complained and were fearful that the Egyptians would destroy them at the edge of the Red Sea. After God brought them across the Red Sea, they whined and complained about no food, no water. When Moses was up on Mount Sinai, receiving the law from God, they made a calf out of gold and worshiped that, while their God was thundering above them on the mountain top. They refused to believe the spies, Joshua and Caleb, who gave a minority report when 12 spies were sent into Canaan, when they told how the people living in Canaan could be destroyed by them with God’s help. They repeatedly doubted God. They repeatedly did not trust God. They repeatedly did not believe what God told them. They repeatedly disobeyed God.

Boy, except for some different details, doesn’t that last paragraph sound just like us? How often do we doubt God? How often do we not trust God? How often do we not believe what God tells us in his holy Word? How often do we disobey God? That really sums up our last year too doesn’t it.

But today we are coming together to hear God’s word again, to worship him.

We have come here to confess our sins, and to be told that our sins – all of them – are forgiven for Jesus sake. We have come to receive the assurance of that forgiveness of sins in the Lord’s Supper, something we can see, taste, smell, and feel on our tongues. Isn’t it interesting that God involves all our senses in this sacrament? One thing that is sometimes done in New Year’s Eve sermons is to review the 10 Commandments. That may have been something you have done for yourself already before you came here. But you have confessed your sins admitting that you have sinned against God in thought, word and deed. And you heard that God forgives your sins because of what Jesus Christ did for you.

What did Jesus Christ do for you? He came to be born as a sinless baby. He came to live a sinless life. He committed no sin in thought, word, or deed. And then he was punished for sin – my sins, your sins, and the sins of the entire world. He died on the cross. He paid for our sins in that way. But that wasn’t the end of it. He also came back to life. He rose from the dead on the third day. That proved that he had done and was able to do everything that he said he would do.

So what is our response? Thankfulness and praise. With the hymn writer we will say:

**I praise and thank Thee, Lord, my God,
For Thine abundant blessing
Which heretofore Thou hast bestowed
And I am still possessing.
Inscribe this on my memory:**

**The Lord hath done great things for me
And graciously hath helped me.** The Lutheran Hymnal, 33:2.

So another reason we have come here is to thank our God. We have much to be thankful for. We could review that great summary of the gospel, the Apostolic Creed. I am especially thinking of Luther's explanation of what God has done for us. God the Father has created us, and still preserves us, guarding and protecting us. God the Son has redeemed us not with gold or silver but with his holy precious blood, with his innocent sufferings and death. God the Holy Ghost has sanctified us, that is, made us holy. He called us by the power of the gospel and gave us faith to believe in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. What I am telling you is not a new message, but it is a message that is especially meaningful as we turn the calendar pages from one year to another. We realize, remember, and give thanks to God for all that he has done for us especially in each of the last 365 days.

You heard that "*Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, 'Thus far has the LORD helped us.'*"

Especially those people that we call 'Western civilizations' have often taken stones and set them up as monuments. We often engrave the stones, carving into the stone a message that will be remembered for as long as the stone stands. As a people we have set up national monuments, state and historical monuments, and even personal monuments. Some cemeteries have very grandiose stone monuments to the lives and deeds of people buried there with lots of things, often exaggerated, inscribed on those stones. That is one way that people remember things. But the hymn writer asked God to inscribe on his memory that **The Lord hath done great things for me And graciously hath helped me.**

We have seen that God has helped his people in the Old Testament, and that he helps his people even today. But listen to how the hymn writer begins every line in the last stanza asking God to continue to help him:

**Help me henceforth, O God of grace,
Help me on each occasion,
Help me in each and every place,
Help me through Jesus' Passion;
Help me in life and death, O God,
Help me through Jesus' dying blood;
Help me as Thou hast helped me!** The Lutheran Hymnal, 33:3.

Hitherto – up until now – God has helped me. He has done this because he is a God of grace. And we ask today that he continue to help us henceforth – from now on, from this moment on, from this day on, until eternity when we shall be with our God in heaven. God, be with us on each occasion, in each and every place, in life and in death. God has helped us and will continue to help us by his undeserved goodness and grace.

And how is it that God helps us? Through Jesus' passion, as the hymn writer says. It is through Jesus' suffering and death that God shows his love to us.

And so finally tonight we ask God to help us in life and death. It is because of Jesus' blood as he was dying on the cross that God shows his love to us.

Please, dear God, continue to help us as you have helped us up till now. Amen.