Psalm 32:1-7 Looking Back at 2010

How did you fare in 2010? Was it a good year for you, a bad one, or an average one? The end of a year always seems to be a good time for us to look back at the past, a time to analyze our actions and activities and to evaluate what has happened to us over the past year. The news media spends a lot of time and effort looking back and comparing our country’s performance this year to what has happened in previous years, and especially since people are still quite concerned about the state of our economy given the recession and government bailout of banks and automakers in previous years. Then too, there are the special events and outstanding news stories of 2010 which always seem to bear repeating before we enter another new year.

This evening, though, we want to look back at our lives from a perspective that’s entirely different from the way the world looks back to 2010. We want to spend a few moments in analyzing our thoughts, words and actions in view of the way God wants us to live as his children. How have we progressed in our Christian living over the past year? How well have we managed to keep God’s commandments, or should we ask instead, how often have we failed to follow his guidelines for our lives. The end of a year is a good time to do such sober soul-searching as we look back over 2010, a time to repent of our sins and shortcomings, but also a time to rejoice in our Savior who has washed away our sins with his holy precious blood.

When King David wrote the words of this 32nd psalm, he too was looking back at his life with shame and remorse in his heart because of the things he had done. David’s problem began when he saw a beautiful woman named Bathsheba bathing on the roof of her home. Lust quickly flooded his heart and filled him with a passionate desire for her. Since he was the king and she was his subject, David was able to satisfy that desire in short order. But then Bathsheba became pregnant. With her husband away at war, their little secret would soon be out, so David tried to cover up his sin. First of all, he sent for her husband, Uriah, and gave him a leave of absence so that he could be with his wife. That way it would look as if Uriah was the child’s actual father. But Uriah refused to enter his house and have marital relations with his wife as long as his comrades were still sleeping in tents on the battlefield. Then David arranged to have Uriah killed in battle. He instructed his commander-in-chief to place Uriah where the fighting was the fiercest and then told him to pull back his troops so that Uriah would be surrounded and struck down by the enemy. The plan worked perfectly. Once Bathsheba was a widow, she was free to marry David after a proper period of mourning for her husband. In the course of time, she then gave birth to a baby boy.

During all this time, David never confessed his sin to anyone, not even to the Lord. Through murder and marriage, he was able to conceal his sin of adultery so that no one was able to speak out against him, at least no one on the outside. But within himself there was a voice that would not be silenced—the voice of his own conscience, which condemned him day and night and kept clamoring for confession. David did his best to ignore it, but it affected him nonetheless. He says: “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.” Although God’s hand is helpful when it lifts us up, it is awful when it presses down hard upon us. Such was David’s experience when he refused to acknowledge his sin before man and God. His conscience kept on roaring about his wrongs, and he was so weakened physically and emotionally by his sense of guilt that he became a nervous wreck. Such was the misery he made for himself by his own impenitence, for although David had learned to know sin, he had forgotten about his Savior.

David may have felt sorry for his sin but he hadn’t really repented of it since repentance involves more than mere sorrow. Repentance calls for a willingness on our part to acknowledge our sin and to confess that we are guilty followed by a turning to the Lord for forgiveness. People will often say that they are sorry for something that they have done, not necessarily because what they did was wrong, but because they got caught doing it. You might say that they are sorry they got caught, but, like David, they aren’t ready to admit that they are guilty of any wrongdoing. But when it comes to confessing our sins to the Lord, we need to confess the guilt as well as the act of sin. There’s really no point in trying to conceal our sins since they are all well known to God. Like David, then, we too need to repent of all of our sins of thought, word and deed, for if there is no repentance on our part, there can be no pardon from the Lord.

Not that our repentance earns God’s forgiveness; it merely opens the way for God to grant us the forgiveness that Christ has earned for one and all through his suffering and death on Calvary. That forgiveness is always there, since Jesus paid for the sins of the whole world. But our impenitence, our refusal to repent, can close the door to that forgiveness that God offers us in Christ.
This evening, then, as we look back at our lives in 2010, we will certainly want to come clean with the Lord. In this connection Luther says: “Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments. Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, employer or employee? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful or lazy? Have you hurt anyone by word or deed? Have you been dishonest, careless, wasteful or done other wrong?” We could go on by asking some additional questions like, “Have I always spoken of my neighbor’s actions in the kindest possible way? Have I always tried to do good and avoid evil? Have I controlled my tongue so that I do not hurt others by the things I say? Have I always been patient with my spouse and family, slow to anger and quick to forgive when others hurt me for whatever reason?” If we’re honest with ourselves, then we too will have to confess with Paul, “The good that I want to do, I don’t do; instead I find myself doing the evil that I don’t want to do.”

Because of that fact, there are some who say, “Forget about it! Don’t let it bother you! Do whatever you want to do. Don’t worry about what’s right or wrong. After all, it’s your life, so live it the way you want to. Don’t let yourself feel guilty because of someone else’s ideas of right and wrong.” Such advice, however, ignores the fact that God is the one who has given us his rules of right and wrong and that we are accountable to him for everything that we say and do. The solution is not to ignore sin or act as if there is no such thing. The Biblical solution to our situation is to sincerely repent of our sins, and then to rejoice in the forgiveness that God has provided for us thanks to our Savior, Jesus Christ. As the Apostle John says: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Here then is our reason for rejoicing this new year’s eve and everyday of our lives—the fact that we have a God who has put away our sins, a God who actually declares us “not guilty” because of what Christ has done for all of us.

In the 32nd Psalm, David expresses that joy with these words: “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.” Did you notice the different pictures that David uses to describe our pardon from the Lord. First of all, he says our “transgressions are forgiven,” literally “taken away or removed.” The burden of our sins has been shifted from us to our Savior, who carried them to Calvary where he left them nailed to the cross. Next he says our “sins are covered.” In other words, when God looks at us he doesn’t see the filthiness of our sins, but rather the gleaming garment of Christ’s perfection, which covers all who put their trust in him. Finally he says, “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.” David’s spirit was full of deceit as long as he kept trying to conceal his sin from God and others. But after he came clean with the Lord, honestly admitted that he was guilty, and threw himself on God’s mercy, the Lord pardoned him completely. In other words, God did not count or charge his sin against him. The same thing holds true for you and me and every sinner who humbly confesses his sins to the Lord. God doesn’t charge us with our iniquity, for as Isaiah says, “The Lord has laid on him (Christ) the iniquity of us all.” Thus the Lord has forgiven the guilt and iniquity of our sins too—he has completely forgotten about them, since the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.

Once our sins have been forgiven, once that roadblock between us and our heavenly Father is removed, then the way is clear for us to approach God as friends rather than enemies. Thus David goes on to say: “Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the might waters rise, they will not reach him.” During his impenitence, David was unable to approach the Lord in prayer. His sin stood like a great barrier between him and the Lord so that he felt isolated, alone and abandoned with no where to turn for help. Once that barrier was removed, David again felt confident to call upon the Lord in prayer. He could also rest assured of God’s presence and his protection throughout his life. Thus he can confidently say: “You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.” Notice how the same man who was oppressed by the presence of God during his impenitence now finds shelter in that same God. With his sins forgiven, David knew that he had no need to fear anything else, since God was obviously on his side. They were friends once again.

The same thing holds true for all who are “godly,” in other words, for every repentant believer. We can rejoice in spite of our many faults and failings because we have a God who forgives and forgets, a God who reassures us of his love and forgiveness by giving us his very own body and blood in the Lord’s Supper, which we are celebrating in all of our services this weekend. So let’s be sincere in our repentance and rejoice in our forgiveness as we say goodbye to 2010 and hello to 2011. Amen.