

Isaiah 63:7-9

John 1:1-5; 14-16

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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## “Grace Upon Grace”

새해 복 많이 받으세요! This is the greeting and the blessing Koreans give to one another to wish each other a happy new year. I'm glad to be here with you gathered in worship as we begin 2023. So, 새해 복 많이 받으세요 to you all as well today. It's a phrase wishing each other blessing and luck in the new year and we wear our hanboks: Korean traditional dress, we eat rice cake soup, and we take turns bowing like all the way to the floor to our elders greeting each with this blessing. After each bow, we then we sit and receive a blessing or wish for the new year from the elder...and bonus, they hand out cash. We play specific games and it's always been a wonderful and memorable tradition that I hope to pass along to my kids. Growing up as children, we looked forward to this with extended family and we would bow and wait patiently as we received the wish and blessing for the new year, which almost always consisted of the same few phrases from grandparents, parents, aunties and uncles: “Study hard. Get good grades. Listen to your parents, be nice to your siblings...” As we got older, it changed slightly but was essentially the same, “Work hard, do your best, listen to your parents, be nice to your siblings, get married, have kids.” And now, the only addition as adults that I hear regularly is “stay healthy.”

As I've grown older and now giving the blessing to nieces and nephews and my own children, I have grown to love this idea of receiving a blessing from our elders and giving a blessing. And it's actually hard in the moment to do this, unless you've thought it out prior, to not just give broad tropes of what you're supposed to say or what society teaches us to say is a blessing. Be good, be kind, listen, do well in school or work, fill in the boxes of those things society tells us we are supposed to do to in order to be a good citizen and stay healthy.

There is nothing wrong with these phrases, but as I was reflecting on what it was I wanted to share with you all this morning as we gathered together on the first day of 2023, as I had *time* to reflect and to think it out, what I would say to you all, Stone Church, as a blessing into this new year, is not about what it is we need to do, or how we need to be, or what else to add to our to-do list to make us better or wiser. I do not have check boxes for you to fill out. Instead what kept coming to me was the phrase we heard from the gospel of John and the sermon title I've named for today... grace upon grace. Grace upon grace to you my friends.

Because you know, although I can and always will recount the gracious deeds of our God, naming and knowing that things were sometimes really hard this past year or weird or fell apart does not diminish those gracious deeds of our God. Both can be true. And the longer I've walked this Jesus journey and annually proclaim the incarnation of God come to us in a child... the more I sit with the fact that God came to us in the flesh and lived among us and see how my own fleshy body is starting to fall apart slowly in ways I was not expecting, the more this story amazes me.

Because we serve a Creator that was willing to be enfleshed in a body! And bodies are weird and fall apart and at the same time they can bear so much and hold so much...The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, Church. God came and chose to make God's home with us in a real body and person of Christ. And although there are times for that message to be glorious, the reality of being a person is that things fall apart, no matter how hard we try to hold it together. And it was into that reality and that mess that God chose to enter and abide with us. Therefore, maybe that also means we can be honest about the fullness of what that means for us as the people of God. The good, the bad, the ugly.

At the beginning of each new year, we are prompted with new goals, resolutions, things to tick off an accomplishment list and then at the end of the year challenged to reflect on those, see what we've done and how far we've come. As a person who loves to-do lists, I get sucked into this trap every year, only to be pretty disappointed that I didn't get to cross much off. If you love lists, the best part of having a list is crossing things off of it. So I always end up discouraged because I could not cross everything off or real talk, I only managed to cross off one thing. We live in a grind culture that has infiltrated every aspect of our lives that has somehow made us believe that if we do this or accomplish that, if we perfect this skill, lose this amount of weight, or make that amount of money or reach this title, then we are living with purpose.

For some of us, maybe especially for those who have felt the raw fragility of life recently, we feel a desperation to try and make the most of everything, only to find ourselves exhausted. And in each phase of our lives, I think the questions we ask ourselves revolve around "Am I doing enough? Have I produced enough? Have I helped enough? Have I left a legacy? Are you satisfied with me, Lord?"

Author Liz Gilbert, whom you might know from her bestselling book "Eat Pray Love" which has sold over 12 million copies worldwide, recently talked to a group of students about how we as people are trying so hard to wrench control out of chaos and that we struggle so much with purpose anxiety that we cannot actually live the lives we have because we are always worried about the next thing.

She shared a story about walking down the streets in Los Angeles because she had some time to kill before her next event and she saw a guy high on a wobbly ladder painting a sign. So she ran across 4 lanes of traffic and held the ladder for this guy for about 40 minutes. The entire time, he did not know she was there and as he finished up and came down to a more secure place on the ladder, she left and walked away. He never knew she had been there. And this best selling author and speaker shared, "What if THAT was the purpose of my life? Not the concept, but that very action in and of itself." She continued, "What if we lived just looking for the next right thing to do?"

What if we could enter this new year free from lists and goals, allowed to sit into the reality of our broken and beautiful bodies and just do the next right thing? What if we freed ourselves from the pressure of the grind or perfectionism or the deep need to be liked so that we could actually hear what God is calling us into next-or simply the next right thing?

Grace upon grace, my friends. From his fullness, we have received grace upon grace. Scripture tells us it was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them... his PRESENCE. Friends, we may want a spirituality that can transcend our broken reality, but in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. In Jesus, we see that a physical and real life and everything that comes with that IS a spiritual life. And if it is from *his fullness* that we have received grace upon grace, can we allow ourselves to receive that as our blessing this day? Will you? Will I?

In a little bit, we will come together at this Table where we will be offered again grace upon grace. In the mystery of it and in the concrete elements of it, we will be asked to trust the host and be the recipients of Emmanuel, God with us. As we prepare ourselves to come, let's put our resolutions, goals, and lists aside-let us put our brave faces and attempts to hold it all together aside, and come as we really are-as Christ came-enfleshed, real, broken, and human. Because there is truly no resolution that will make you more worthy of the love that abides with you and that abides here. You are already worthy. If you need to have a goal, let's just do the next right thing.

And so, to close, just as my family practices the tradition of receiving blessings for the new year from our elders, receive this blessing I found at the last minute that fit perfectly with my message today written by Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber called a blessing for the new year:

"As you enter this new year, as you pack away the Christmas decorations and get out your stretchy pants, as you face the onslaught of false promises offered you through

new disciplines and elimination diets, as you grasp for control of yourself and your life and this chaotic world,

May you remember that there is no resolution that, if kept, will make you more worthy of love. There is no resolution that, if kept, will make life less uncertain and allow you to control a pandemic and your children and the way other people act. So this year, May you just skip the part where you resolve to be better do better and look better this time.

May you give yourself the gift of really, really low expectations. May you expect so little of yourself that you can be super proud of the smallest of accomplishments. May you expect so little of the people in your life that you actually notice and cherish every small lovely thing about them.

May you expect so little of the supply chain and the service industry that you notice more of what you do get and less of what you don't and then just tip really well anyhow.

May you expect to get so little out of <2023> that you can celebrate every single thing it offers you, however small.

Because you deserve joy and not disappointment So, I wish you a Happy as possible New Year.” 새해 복 많이 받으세요. **(bow)** Grace upon grace, my friends. Amen