

## Annual Address 2023

**Delivered at Grace Church on the Third Sunday of Epiphany, January 22, 2023**

*Readings:* Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23; Psalm 27:1-13

*Text:* The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? \*

the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid? Ps 27:1

This is a two for one, sermon and annual address, so I ask for a little more of the generous gift of your attention this morning. I am keenly aware that your time and attention *are* gifts, seldom bestowed in our hurried modern world, and we preachers should do the work we have been given to do with care, thought, pop cultural references and stories about our pets.

I am sure I am not alone in listening to a lot of Crosby, Stills and Nash music this week in light of David Crosby's death. Running through my head in particular is *Helplessly Hoping* (a Stephen Stills composition), with its beautiful harmonies, alliterative lyrics and clever, dare I say profound refrain:

They are one person  
they are too alone  
they are three together  
they are for each other

Sounds like counting one to four but the too in too alone is t o o and the for in for each other is f o r. When the one person joins two others and becomes three together they are no longer too alone but for each other.

Here's the pet story: Friday afternoon, as I was working on this address, Zoe put a paw on my leg and said time for a walk. So we took a walk across the street and though it was a cold and rainy day, the woods were full of beauty: a red cardinal on a green pine branch, a small herd of deer looking over and then running away (Zoe running too), a bright orange fungus on an fallen branch. Little blessings, small epiphanies. I spent a few moments watching a little stream ripple and sing as it carried out the rainwater to Fishkill Creek, the Hudson River and the Atlantic Ocean. Just so, small observations lead one to think of big things— as Emerson, Thoreau and the Transcendentalists taught.

Coming so soon after Monday's national holiday, I recalled what Martin Luther King Jr., a keen student of Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience, had written in his 1967 *Christmas Sermon on Peace*, "In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be

what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...This is the inter-related structure of reality.”

A similar sentiment is found in his 1963 *Letter from Birmingham Jail* where King memorably wrote:

“I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

King is right; we are all connected, all related. West and East, North and South, black, white, brown, humanity and the biosphere, people of all faiths and people of none. To each their time of life and call to care, each and all connected to God and God to all, the source, the power and the end of all journeys. Let the people say Amen.

But somehow we keep living as if we are not related, not part of a network of mutuality, a single garment of destiny. We go our separate ways, lead our increasingly isolated personal lives, we are too alone within bubbles of socially constructed identities, informed by “curated” takes on reality. We divide into political parties, religious factions, warring nations. More *against* them—the enemies, the others—than *for* each other. This too is an inescapable truth about humanity today. The center struggles to hold, the extremes have passion and energy, the centrifugal forces threaten to break up the unity, and humanity threatens to destroy life itself.

And it seems to me *this* is the work of the church: to connect us to God and each other, to seek and see each and meet together without fear but faith, without hate but love, knitting together what is always threatening to unravel, the fabric of our single garment of destiny. We are citizens of one country, stewards of our one planet. As Christians, when we come together we must not come as factions, as Paul writes to the Corinthians, as denominational partisans of Peter or Paul, but as followers of Christ, each in our own communal tradition. That’s how we show the world the light of Christ and carry on his work of proclaiming the good news of God’s reign of love, teaching the Way of Jesus and working to heal the world.

Ah, but how do these noble sentiments work out in practice, what is their cash value, pragmatists reasonably ask. Let’s use our beloved Grace Church as an example.

Today is Chinese New Year. An auspicious day. A good day to look ahead. For review of 2022, you can read my Rector's Report, the Wardens' Report and all the reports printed up and posted online for our Annual Meeting. There you can learn more about all we have done this past year, tremendous work in outreach to and worship with the Spanish-speaking community of Northeast Dutchess, our food programs, prayer shawl ministry, fund raising efforts and community family events. You can read about our continuing programs for young children in the Preschool, for youth through EPIC and a new academic mentoring program, for young adults in Grace Year, our programs of spiritual formation and worship, including monthly services at the Fountains. You can see for yourself that we have freshly painted our campus buildings and improved accessibility to the Parish Hall. You can read how we did financially in a difficult year, and we thank God and all our members and friends for their support as we managed to balance the budget thanks to a December surge in giving. Our attendance is low considered historically but we are growing back after covid and our online service continues to be viewed and and facebook and website pages followed. So there is much to celebrate and be thankful for as we look ahead to 2023.

Good preparation for the future depends on grasping the present as well as the past. Effective planning requires honest assessment of challenges and failures as well as successes and opportunities. Our children's program struggles to get traction, attendance as noted has not quickly rebounded after covid, and most importantly we, like most churches and indeed most legacy organizations and institutions, face declining levels of trust and participation among rising generations. What to do?

Face reality but trust in God. Recognize the risks but proceed with courage. Take heart; for as the Psalmist sings, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?"

Remember the three Gs: Grace, Gratitude, and Generosity. Grace first and always: we are weak alone but with God all is possible. The world is always changing, faster each day it seems, and the church is always in danger, from within and without. But we are so blessed. We have so much. Whatever we put on the negative ledger we can put on the other side: God is with us, Emmanuel. We are an Easter people and we have been blessed. Remember that in your own life as well.

Awareness of grace leads to gratitude. A grateful heart is full, a grateful heart has hope, a grateful heart responds with generosity. And generosity is not just a financial act, but as Eric Law writes in *Holy Currencies*, money is just one form

of passing on goods to make the world better (but one we do need!). Goods of health, truth, wellness, leadership, place and time are why people give to Grace.. We work to develop and pass on these goods here at Grace—and so in your own lives. Gifts of friendship lead to healing, words of truth to seeing light, leadership to effective action, all dependent on volunteers giving time and having a place to work in, a community to build on and build up.

This is how we will face the future and meet its challenges and seize its opportunities.

Finally, to get down to details, here are some particular projects we hope we work on this year:

Continue work to enhance the regional impact of our outreach efforts. Evelyn Garzetta and the Grace Year programs are key here.

Continue to offer well designed and engaging study and small group offerings for spiritual formation, including contemplative prayer and worship services—and, something new, small group pilgrimages. Alison has great ideas and experience to lead the way along with Molly. Our Grace Year fellows are also a big part of this, bringing new ideas and energy. If you would like to be part of the planning, please consider yourself invited.

Continue improving the property: the rededication of our great Resurrection window will be in April and I hope to also get going on the long-awaited new windows for west wall. We are also going to work on a master plan for the property so that we can enhance its beauty and utility and transition from fossil fuel use to renewables. If you would like to be part of Green Team let me know.

Enhance our stewardship program. Right now we have a pretty low key annual campaign—which is fine, although I wish more people would pledge or indicate to us their charitable giving plans for the year so we can be less anxious about cash flow. But we will also have a *Christian Witness at Life's End* educational program, probably in Easter, to help older folks (though not only older folks) plan for their health care, family and charitable giving needs and hopes. And also a program for younger people whose charitable giving looks different than earlier generations, not so much given to support legacy institutions such as the church but as targeted giving—not gifts but investments—in meeting needs or accomplishing social goods. We want to explore that as well.

Finally, our worship team—clergy, musicians, choir, lay readers, chalice bearers, ushers, and altar guild: our leaders will be renewing efforts to recruit and train volunteers to be come part of this wonderful way to give back to the church and

be part of a deep and meaningful work. As the Psalmist also sang: “Behold the fair beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.” We “worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” and every one of you are welcome to be part of one or more of these teams. We prepared sign up sheets for volunteer and study groups and they await you on a table in the Parish Hall following the service—and then at the back of the church for those not present today. Please pray on what you might do: live with grace full of gratitude responding with generosity.

One last word in closing: Remember, one person is too alone but when two or three are gathered for each other, then Christ is in their midst and the world will know them by their love. May Grace Church be such a people and place.

In Christ’s name, Amen.

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