

I think we have to take a second and just acknowledge the calendar sized elephant in the room. It's been a year. And I don't mean in the like exaggerated *it's been a year* kind of way, I mean literally, here we are, the calendar has turned over and it has been an actual year since our entire world flipped upside down. A year ago I had no idea what church online looked like, if it was even something we could do. So I stood by the baptismal font, read the gospel and did my sermon...and that was it. We streamed without a tripod or anything to hold the phone. We had no microphones, no music, no bulletin, honestly absolutely no clue what we were doing. And yet, we told ourselves, it was temporary. We could do this for a couple of weeks and by Easter we'd be back to normal and it wouldn't feel like all that much had changed. Almost all of us thought we could shut the world down for a few weeks and then all would be well. And here we are...a full calendar year later and some things have changed but still most things haven't.

There have been a lot of articles going around lately about how a year in we're starting to see long term impacts of having lived into quarantine for twelve months. People are noting that they feel more forgetful, their brains feel foggier, everything feels just a smidge off despite the fact that some things have gone back to normal, or at least normal adjacent. And what it all comes down to is the reality that this past year has been an overwhelming

amount of processing for our brains to do. I'm not sure that we've even realized fully the underlying level of stress and strain that we've all been operating under and now that we're slowly coming out of it, we're starting to feel the impacts of that. It's been a wilderness of a year and we have to find the space to be graceful with ourselves for how we deal with the aftereffects. Honestly, we have to give ourselves space to acknowledge that this year has been one in which we have all been deeply, deeply human in the best and worst ways. Something that all of our lessons kind of hit on this morning.

If there is anyone that we can really and truly relate to after the last year, it's gotta be the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. They too probably had the thought of, we'll do this for a little bit and then God will send a solution and we'll go on about our merry lives. 40 years later... but for now things are still early on and it's just not going well. They were hungry and wanted food, so God sent them manna and quails. Well, now they're tired of the same old, same old. They're hungry and honestly, they're whiny. They're the equivalent of your kids sitting in the backseat ten minutes into a multi-hour drive going, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" And then they just kind of up the ante. Why did we leave Egypt?! At least there we had food!! Suddenly, after a few too many

days in the wilderness, they're longing for a return to slavery because at least that life was a known quantity! They're at such a point of annoyance and despondence that they don't care that they have food, because it's not the food they want. They don't care that they have God, because God isn't operating how they want God to. They're longing for normalcy, even if normalcy wasn't all that great to begin with.

I mean there is a level here where this is us going I know quarantine is keeping us safe, but at least before it we had toilet paper! Or I know that we have food but the store shelves just *do not* have the brand I want anymore! How many times in the last year have we basically done our own equivalent of are we there yet? Are we there yet? We're still doing it. We're still frustrated and we're still annoyed and there are a million things we want to whine about because we're just done with the wilderness of this whole thing.

And unfortunately, that isn't the only less than stellar shade of humanity that we've seen this year. The writer of Ephesians talks about the fact that salvation and grace aren't the result of good works, because if they were then you'd have a world of people going around boasting about all the good things that they've done, and boasting just isn't part of the gospel deal. It's not what we're called to do. And yet...somehow, even in the midst of a year where humanity has come together in ways we maybe never

anticipated, we've had some doses of that too, or at least what some people have perceived as boasting. We've watched the arguments break out in the middle of stores. *I'm* wearing my mask. Well, I'm *not* wearing mine. You're wrong, I'm right, and let's scream a little bit in the middle. People arguing over who has and who hasn't gotten to see their families and if those decisions are right or wrong. People arguing over vacations and decisions each person has made, and no matter what, if you disagree with them, we all find that high and mighty road to take to prove that we're on the right side of whatever argument we're facing. No matter what we say, it is followed up by the ardent belief that we're right, and nothing else matters. We boast in our own knowledge and decision making, even if they might be wrong or skewed or biased.

It's the same things these early Christian communities would have seen. *I* have the gospel right because I'm doing this. No, *I* have it right because I did the opposite. I bet God loves me more because I'm this type of person. It's what humans do. We look at ourselves, even when it comes to faith, and we're determined that not only are we right, but we're so right we've gotta shout from the rooftops about it too.

So, we whine and we boast, and then we also slide a little bit into our Nicodemus shoes. We miss that part of our gospel this week. That Jesus is

saying these things to Nicodemus, a Jewish leader who has come to him in the middle of the night to profess his belief. Jesus acknowledges his faith, but says, dude, you can't do this in hiding. You can't hide in the darkness, you can't love the darkness because it keeps you safe from the consequences of faith. Part of faith is being out in the light and proclaiming it for all to see, letting it shine forth. And Nicodemus just isn't ready for that. He's not ready to reveal his true self, his heart to those around him, for fear that they will reject him and that he'll lose everything.

In the midst of a pandemic which has made us want to scream, isn't this enough for us to handle?! There have been plenty of things this year which have caused us to want to hide in the darkness with our beliefs because standing up and speaking out just feels too risky. We hole up in the darkness when confronted with issues of systemic racism and prejudice, we run in the other direction when it comes to honest political discourse, we don't always want to be upfront about what this year has made us confront in terms of our faith life and the way the church has operated for so long we don't know how to do anything different. When everything else feels chaotic, the darkness feels safe.

So, yeah, this year has highlighted a bit that we're human. Humans who have a tendency to whine, boast, and hide in the darkness, but thank

God, quite literally, that that is not the message of this morning. Because what does this morning come down to? “By grace you have been saved.” “For God so loved so loved the world.” We can whine, we can boast, we can hide all we want, and God’s response remains the same. I love you, have some grace. We can tell God that what we have isn’t exactly what we want, that we want God to operate differently, and God will keep saying, I love you, have some grace. We can think that we are the best dang thing to happen to the world and we’ve got this more right than our neighbor, and God will keep saying, I love you, have some grace. We can be afraid and worried and keep things to ourselves, and God will keep saying, I love you, have some grace.

If we have learned anything from this year, my hope is that we have learned the overwhelming power of love and grace, for our neighbor and for ourselves. Because we know we’ve had our moments, right? We know that there have been times this year where we haven’t been our best selves, and that is all part and parcel of being a human during a pandemic, and God breathes into those moments a word of hope, the promise that we can be graceful with ourselves because even when we screw up, God is going to love us, even when we are the worst versions of ourselves God is going to love us. And if we have the ability to hold that for ourselves, we need to

hold it for our neighbors too. We're all just trying to get through this as best as we can, and so when we see our neighbors struggling or when we don't always agree with them, we need to be able to find the space in our hearts to remember they're human, they're children of God, and they need grace too.

There is no denying that when it comes to the massive level of love that we receive from God, we don't even come close to deserving it. And yet, God keeps giving it to us. No matter how many times we slip up, no matter how much we whine or boast or hide, God is always there with this incredible amount of love. It doesn't matter what we do, it doesn't matter what our neighbor does, we can't stop God from loving us, and we can't stop God from loving our neighbor, that's what makes grace a just straight up gift. We might not always receive it well, let ourselves feel it, but it's there. It never stops. And when we give ourselves space to get out of our own heads, we realize that, that God is always right there, right where God always is, giving us grace upon grace, whether it's a pandemic or a normal day. So, a year later, it's ok to be human, it's ok that we've gotten some things wrong, it's ok that we're tired and whiny and done with it all. It's ok that you're who you are. Let grace abound. God loves you. Every minute of everyday of every year, no matter what year it is. **AMEN!!!**