

Grace Lutheran Church – Rialto, CA
70th Anniversary
1 Kings 8:22-30
Ephesians 2:1-10
Luke 19:1-10

How many of y'all believe that you are aging gracefully? Aging gracefully – what does that even mean? A 7-year-old boy is not said to be “aging gracefully;” he’s just growing up. So I guess that one has to be advanced in years in order to be aging gracefully. Because of AI (artificial intelligence), my computer knows that I am a 60-year-old man. So my computer, when I’m online, shows me images of my peer group, 60ish people, men and women. Somebody is trying to sell me something. These images of *supposed* people, 60ish people, are unreal, totally fake-arama. The women have just the right amount of gray in their hair, always in the right spots. They have wrinkles that show character, wrinkles that show experience but never age. The men are too tan, their teeth are too white and their hair is too thick. Among other things, the computer is trying to sell me an idea of what it is to age gracefully.

70 years is a long time. Has the world changed since 1954? How many of y'all would say that the world is *not* aging gracefully? Unbelieving man is an aimless typhoon – destructive, unpredictable, and blind to the havoc he causes. The unbelieving world knows no peace, has *never* known peace, does not *want* to know peace. And here Grace Lutheran Church stands. In the world, Grace Lutheran Church stands. A beacon of light, a dispensary of grace, a harbor for sinners who are drawn to Christ, drawn to His cross and tomb, drawn to forgiveness, life, salvation – here Grace Lutheran Church stands. Has Grace seen the storms of this fallen creation blow around her? Jesus said this: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock” (Matthew 7:24-25). Has Grace ever and always been a body of believers who gladly hears Christ’s words and endeavors to do them? When you walk in those doors for the Divine Service on Sunday morning do you know, in your bones **know**, that this congregation is built on the Rock?

The storms aren’t going away. The culture around us is growing ever more foolish. The foolish build on the sand. The foolish, too, are evangelists. “Come on in, the sinking sand is wonderful.” The storms aren’t going away. Some will try to take you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy that depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (Colossians 2:8). Is Grace interested in being taken captive? Would Grace have stood for 70 years if she had a milquetoast clergy, a wobbly doctrine, a wishy-washy Messiah? Here’s a line from a hymn I like: For many years, O God of grace, This church has been your dwelling place And we your congregation. On Christ, our precious cornerstone, Our faith is built, and Christ alone Is still our one foundation. This day We pray: “Let us greet you, Lord, and meet you Here with singing, All our praises to you bringing” (For Many Years, O God of Grace – Lutheran Worship, #325).

Solomon lifted up his hands and prayed, a prayer of dedication. He had just overseen the construction of the Temple, the glorious Temple, the place where God’s presence would dwell.

Solomon lifted up his hands and he prayed, asked: “Will God indeed dwell on the earth?” It is the question upon which the life of Grace Lutheran Church is predicated. Will God really dwell on the earth? Much later, an archangel came to a virgin young lass in Nazareth to answer that question. “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” (Luke 1:28). Gabriel told Mary, “behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:31f.). “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). What Solomon said is true: “heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you” (1 Kings 8:27). And yet God dwelled in Mary’s womb. Almighty God takes up our poor flesh and bone. In Christ all the fullness of the Deity dwells in bodily form (Colossians 2:9). The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). That is the reason there is a Grace Lutheran Church. That is the glorious reality that animates this holy house. God becomes present in order to save us. God is with us. God dwells in this place. There is no Grace Lutheran Church apart from the Incarnation. Because God was made man, here Grace Lutheran Church stands!

I hate to say this but there is a line in one of our hymns that is just plain rotten. Please, no throwing tomatoes at the pulpit if this happens to be your favorite hymn – I’m just the messenger. Here’s the line: “Surely in temples made with hands God, the Most High is not dwelling” (Built on the Rock – Lutheran Service Book, #645 stanza 2). That’s just awful, it’s wrong. Jesus said: “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). “I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:26). “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). How dark and poor and void this congregation would be if Christ were not here, with us, to shepherd His flock, to graft you into His death and resurrection, to lead you to heaven. Think of all those whom Christ has served in this place. Bride and groom who have stood at this altar and made their vow and were united in Christ. Confirmands who rejoiced to fully participate in the life of the church, the life of Christ. Sinners who’ve been absolved by those who stand in Christ’s stead and speak with His authority. Mourners who’ve been comforted by the resurrection, comforted by Christ. Aging gracefully? Oh, yes, Grace Lutheran Church is aging gracefully. Christ’s work in this place is real. Jesus’ work in this place is as real as His work on the holy cross.

Man faced a calamity. Man faced a storm that he could not endure, could not calm. Sin infects the heart, the soul, the body. No one is immune. Death is a real enemy. Death has no compassion, no mercy. Satan hates man and death is his unholy instrument. Satan wields his instrument cruelly. And God was made man. Jesus came to disarm our enemy, came to endure our punishment, came to destroy death, came to destroy the works of the devil. Will God really dwell on a cross? Is that where Solomon expected God to manifest His glory? Pure terror is what the cross stood for. Humiliation and pain so intense that it would render its victim unrecognizable as human; that’s what the cross stood for. And God unleashes His glory there. Grace comes from that cross. Marriage and confirmation and baptism and absolution and holy communion come from that cross, come from Jesus’ work on Good Friday. Grace Lutheran Church preaches Christ and Him crucified. That is how Grace Lutheran Church ages gracefully. Grace Lutheran Church is radiant precisely because she preaches Christ and Him crucified. Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

The typhoon of man's sin was stilled by Jesus' death. Quiet! Be still! The water of sinful man and his idolatrous heart was changed into the wine of Christians, disciples, saints of Grace Lutheran Church. Christ's ministry defines this place, defines you, and defines your future. Grace is receiving something that you don't deserve and could never earn. Grace is the merit of Christ being attributed to you as a free gift. You're saved by grace. When you were dead in trespasses and sins God made you alive in Christ, it's by grace you've been saved. Salvation has come to this house. Salvation is *in* this house. Jesus paid the price for our salvation. Grace is alive with Christ's life. His church is aging gracefully. The tide of grace is sweeping more and more people into His kingdom. The beauty of Christ's life is in full view in this place. Seventy years is a long time. Life here at Grace Lutheran Church – what a marvelous prelude to heaven.