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Sermon from the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas  
December 31st 2017

Well, Happy New Year's Eve, friends. Looking around at you all, I can feel pretty confident many of you probably celebrate in the same way Kerith and I do: by going to bed at 8pm. It's a fine tradition, wholly underrated, one our children have helped us perfect. It is likely we will be in bed at 7:30pm, actually, catching our breath a bit, and reflecting on the year that was and the year to come.

My early bedtime, however, will not stop me from making New Year's resolutions, that slightly maniacal practice of setting a goal too difficult to reach which most of us have abandoned, in shame, three weeks later. I've read a few articles on resolutions this past week, some claiming to offer actually achievable, if not slightly bizarre goals: "Do 10 squats every time you go to the restroom. My friend does that and her legs look amazing," one person suggested. "Do something physical first thing in the morning, like sweeping," said another. There were also the anti-resolution articles, which suggest things like "Don't exercise, sleep in!" or "Embrace schlub! You like pjs and flannels? Wear them all day." Resolution book lists have been published, full of self-help titles that inspire us to do things like be more like the Danish who have a concept called HYGGE (hoogah) which translates as "coziness" and essentially means harmony, comfort, choosing the "we" over the "me" and, importantly, good lighting. Nothing consistent prevails in these articles, by the way. Each one contradicts the next. Lose weight; embrace yourself as you are! Make a new meal every week; order in more! Try yoga; wait, you haven't tried yoga yet? It's as if New Year's resolutions are a time for our inner critic to start an argument with that other part of ourselves that thinks our inner critic is a nag and should stop talking.

This dynamic is slightly self-defeating. The literature shows that failing to achieve one's resolutions makes us more miserable than if we had never set them in the first place, But it's still really tempting. I

personally love sitting down before a new year and deciding what things I want to change. It gives me a sense of mastery and control — however false and fleeting — that I enjoy dwelling in for a short while. It's as if 2018 is my untamed landscape, and my fresh new goals will be the design I impose on it. I can't wait. Finally: a year that will unfold exactly as I plan it.

And yet as I, and others, do this every December 31st, as we say good bye to one calendar year and say hello to another, full of plans and resolutions, we somehow know that each year has a way of surprising us, knocking us down, and lifting us up. Looking back, 2017 was full of events well outside our control. Old friends moved off island and new friends arrived. Some of you became grandparents or parents for the first time. Little babies were born, and people and dogs we dearly loved passed away, some suddenly, some after long illnesses or simply, a long life. Some started new schools, took trips to new places. We got sick, we got better, we got sick again, some got taller and some got shorter, we obsessed over the news, we took breaks from the news, we lost ten pounds, we gained ten pounds, we took a 2 year old to New York, we vowed never again to take a 2-year old to New York, we lived full lives with ups and downs not of our own planning. In other words, we started the year off with a vision, and closed with a year that might not bear any resemblance to the year we imagined.

St. Ignatius has a way of getting us unstuck from this annual dynamic of trying to assert control over the uncontrollable. Ignatius knew that the unknown future can be a source of great anxiety and our need for control can sometimes manifest in poor decision-making and although he didn't say it, poor resolution-making. Ignatius would tell us that as we look to an unknown future, first look to the past, in gratitude. See what things brought you the greatest joy, the greatest peace. After all, as this morning's Gospel tells us, from Jesus "we have all received, grace upon grace." He is "full of grace and truth," full of "light," a light which "enlightens everyone."

As you ponder 2017 in gratitude, the things that rise to the surface might surprise you. They aren't always the *happiest* things, but they may be the holiest things. As I looked back, I realized that one of the times I felt like I was standing on holy ground was when I visited Frances Kikumoto a few hours before she passed away. A few other moments popped up and I realized a pattern: these were times when I was given a glimpse of something just beneath the surface, something I almost missed seeing entirely. Holy ground isn't always happy ground, but it's that place where deep down you know that where you are is better than happy. I hope that each of you try it. To do it well, you have to ask God for help and be truly open to what surfaces.

What you will discover is that these moments — in Ignatius' terminology "consolation" — are a sign of the way forward. Ignatius tells us to savor all that was good because it organically produces gratitude, and in this gratitude we make way better choices, we set far better resolutions.

For me, it means that even though in 2018 I want to declutter my house and hike the crater more and write thank you notes, when I sit in gratitude I find myself wanting to do something else: I want to honor the hidden things more. To honor more the life that beats underneath the chatter and the busyness and the small talk. To get out of my own way, to listen with my heart more so than my ears. To operate from my center more so than from my surface. Of course, this goal is unachievable unless I do one last thing: I ask God to help me.

So this New Year's Eve, as you tuck yourself into bed at 7:45pm, and you begin to think about waking up in a fresh new year, dwell, with God's help, in what you are most grateful for from 2017. And in the warm glow of thankfulness, in the warm glow of sitting in grace, ask God to help you cooperate a bit more with grace. To trust that God has plans for our welfare and not for our harm, to trust that in the year

ahead, we will find ourselves, once again, standing on holy ground. Life, we all know, unfolds around us, catching each of us in its current, taking us places we may not have guessed or anticipated. We do not walk into the vast wild of 2018 unaccompanied. We walk with a God who goes before us, rendering holy that which we may otherwise run from, surprising us with goodness and with grace right when we need it most, upending our carefully laid plans, and confounding our desire to control. We are God's children, after all, for whom he tenderly cares as a devoted, ever-patient, wise parent. Jesus knows it's ok if you don't do 10 squats when you use the restroom — something, I'll admit, I never thought I'd say to a congregation. God only wants us to walk more deeply into the gift that is Jesus — where light and life and truth abound. Happy New Year, my friends.