

New Year's Message for 2024
Sunday, December 31, 2023 Canada (Monday, January 1, 2024 Japan)

God is good!

A look back at the year 2023

Happy New Year to everyone! What kind of year was 2023 for you? Following the war in Ukraine last year, the war between the Gaza Strip and Israel two months ago has made the world anxious. This has caused prices in Japan to rise and bean sprouts have become a staple on the dinner table (^). The kanji for this year chosen at Kiyomizu-dera Temple in Kyoto was "ZEI (tax)". It seems to represent the reality of the harsh, dreamless lives of the people themselves. There was also some good news. Immediately after completing his unprecedented contract in the majors, Otani donated autographed gloves to elementary schools all over Japan as Christmas gifts. There was a sad occasion at our church. Mr. Tsutomu Tada, a founding member of our church, passed away. In his memorial message the other day, Pastor. Yoshiyuki expressed our gratitude for the contribution he made to MJCF. Thank you very much, Tsutomu-san. We all look forward to seeing you again.

I have selected some of my most memorable events of 2023. What news was memorable to you? By the way, in the New Year's message for 2023, entitled "Strengthening the Inner Man, Rooted in God's Love." That meant that God wanted us to be grown our personal inner man. The verse that I told was Ephesians 3:16-17, "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love." This Word emphasized the importance of being rooted and growing in the deep love of God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ. How much have you been rooted in God's love during last year? Thankfully, we at MJCF were faced with the problem of the church place, and we began to pray seriously about church growth specifically. Miwako-san was looking for a church place while also taking care of her husband, Tsutomu-san. At one point, I was worried that she might get tired. Thank you very much, Miwako-san. And also, Mr. Taka, Ms. Noriko Imai, Ms. Sanae, Ms. Yuko, Ms. Hanako, and Ms. Iseko! We were thankful that God seems to be promoting the spiritual growth of our church as well as our individual spiritual growth.

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Now, I would like to talk about the New Year message for 2024. The Word that I prayed and decided on is Galatians 6:9, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper

time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Here "good" is the Hebrew word "tob," which in the Old Testament means something like 'goodness, grace, mercy, happiness'. This same meaning is the Greek word 'agathos' in the New Testament. The word "good" in **Romans 8:28**, where it says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." We find the good in this verse that also means as agathos. And we know that "good" is God's character or attribute. In **Mark 10:18**, Jesus says. "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." The word 'good' here is also agathos.

God is good !

Do you believe that God is really good? Even though there is a war in Ukraine, a war between the Gaza Strip and Israel? When there a single mom raising severely disabled her son in our neighborhood? In our limited minds, thinking, and our worldview, it is hard to understand how God is good. But the Bible consistently says that God is good. The event that best illustrates that God is the One who is good is God's own saving work for mankind. God did not express His goodness only with His mouth. Through the Exodus, God freed Israel from slavery and made them God's people. He also sent His Son Jesus to the world to save mankind through His crucifixion and resurrection. God's goodness was not philosophical, psychological, or otherwise fanciful. God's goodness was the action-oriented goodness of forgiving and saving human sins by crucifying His beloved only begotten Son and killing Him miserably. God kept His promise of salvation despite thousands of years of sin until He began to send Jesus Christ into the world. That is what God reaped when His time came. Here is a quiz for you. What is the opposite of 'God's goodness'? That is not evil things. The correct answer is 'death'. Through Jesus Christ, God has accomplished goodness, the grace that gives eternal life, and has delivered mankind from death. Hallelujah!

I pray to experience this good God more and more in 2024. In **Matthew 19:16-22**, a rich young man asks Jesus what good things he must do to have eternal life. Jesus responds, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and then come, follow me." So, we can see here that good deeds are to follow Jesus. I want to follow Jesus with you in 2024 and declare from the bottom of our heart that God is good. When I thought about what I should do to achieve this, I realized that I should experience this God with my own experiences. As a plan, I want to spend more time in communion with God. This year, I want to actually increase the time through prayer, praise, worship, reading the Bible, QT, declaring etc. as a way of communicating with God.

Our prayers are stored in a golden censer.

Revelation 8:3-4 says that the prayers of believers are offered on the altar at God's throne. "Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne (v. 3). The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before from God from the angel's hand (v. 4)." These words tell us that our prayers accumulate in God's golden censer. We complement the treasure chest with precious metals. As such, our prayers are noble, so they go into the treasure chest, God's golden censer.

I was reminded of one thing when I read this verse. When I was struggling in Canada, I cashed my friends in the church complaining about various things and I talked endlessly for hours. If that wasn't enough, after returning to Japan, I spent hours talking about my struggles to my friends nearby. But now I am very sorry for all of mine. But I thought it was a waste of time, that if I had spent much of that time praying to God, my prayers would have been stored in a golden censer.

Let's get close to God with prayer.

But here is one problem. That is, I was not that close to God at that time. I have a friend of mine who has been suffering in her marriage with her husband since the beginning of her marriage. But she was saying to me recently. "Yoko, I finally fell in love with my husband after 25 years of my marriage." I thought to myself, if it took me 25 years to understand one husband, how long would it take me to know God? But then I thought that I might not be thinking about God for even 30 minutes a day. Honestly, close your eyes now and think about it. Are you more intimate with your friends than you are with God? 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says, 'Pray constantly'. By continually, I mean unceasingly, moment by moment, like taking a breath. This attitude of prayer is to think about God constantly. When I was studying theology, I learned that the Holy Spirit lives in my heart, and for the first time in my life, I called out, "Holy Spirit!" Then I realized that I had never called the Holy Spirit even though I had been living a life of faith in many years, and I cried because I felt sorry to the Holy Spirit. Since then, I have wished to become closer to God more and more. Prayer is as intimate as a conversation between best friends, a married couple, or a parent and child. We just spend time together without any purpose in our close relationship. I hope you too will call out to the Holy Spirit.

Read the Bible and listen to God's voice.

In John 10, Jesus teaches us about fellowship with God like this. "I am the good Shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me (v. 14)." Jesus and we are in a relationship

of mutual knowing and communication. So, what do we know each other? "I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (v. 11)." Jesus loved us and laid down his life for us. We are his sheep and we know his love well. Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. (v. 27)." Jesus says that we can discern His voice. But we listen to many different voices. The voice we listen to most often is our own. Other voices we listen are from our parents, our friends, teachers, schools, and society. But more than these voices, this year I would like to listen more to the voice of Jesus who laid down his life for us. This voice is not our own beliefs or the self-help voice of psychology. It is the voice of God based on the Bible. It is the unchanging Word of God from the Bible over thousands of years. Read the Bible during our prayer time. It is important to get the context of the Bible, so I recommend reading it through. If you don't understand something, skip it. You can skip the genealogy in Matthew 1 and start reading from chapter 2. The drama bible is also great. You can listen to it while washing dishes or driving. This will help you practice praying constantly.

Declare the Words of God with our own mouth

Then, proclaim the Word aloud as a response to listen to Jesus' voice. Romans 10:9-11 "That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (v. 9). For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved (v. 10). As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." (v. 11)" God is the one who will not let us put to shame. This year, let us make it a habit to proclaim and declare the Word we listen in the Bible and through the messages. I believe that through this habit, our unbelief will be corrected to be faithful and we will be able to live as God's children.

Let's record our prayer time in a note like a bankbook. ^^

As I mentioned at the beginning of the message, let's increase the time we spend in communion with God by actively incorporating 'praise, worship, Bible reading, prayer, declaring the Word, QT,' etc. I am going to record my communion time with God in this small notebook. Until about ten years ago, when the Internet was not widely used, international phone calls cost 100 yen per minute. So, if you prayed with God for 30 minutes a day, 30 x 100 yen is 3,000 yen. If you prayed with God for an hour, it would be 6,000 yen. Why don't you join me in keeping a prayer bankbook, and if you save up for a year, it may increase to hundreds of millions of yen. You will be a millionaire in the heaven! It is the great riches of prayer! Our prayers will be stored in a golden censer before God and will be powerful in His time, and He will work greatly through our prayers.

Let us pray together.

Beloved Heavenly Father, God is good. Thank you. The New Year may be a more turbulent year, but we want to pray for our families, friends, society and the world, deepening our fellowship with the good God who is good, and not being swayed by the values of this world. This year in particular, please also teach us God's vision for the church. Also, please help us, Holy Spirit, to enjoy our personal fellowship with God. Please guide us so that our prayers will reap in God's time. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ alone. Amen.