

“Grace upon Grace”
 delivered Sunday, January 2, 2011
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 John 1:1-14

The story is told that when the poet, Robert Louis Stevenson, was a little boy, more than a century ago, he was sitting one night by a window in his room, watching a lamplighter light the street lights below. Asked what he was doing, Stevenson said, “I am watching a man poke holes in the darkness.”

With some of the most eloquent language in all of scripture, John’s gospel opens by poking holes in the darkness. It says that precisely, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” But it also makes other equally enlightening affirmations: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...the true light, which illumines everyone was coming into the world...to all who believed in his name he gave power to become children of God...the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth...From his fullness we have received grace upon grace.” One biblical scholar notes, “Within these verses there is a statement and restatement of the same message. Like the motion of a wave running up the seashore each section carries the same message farther.” (1) Another scholar likens the prologue to a musical overture that “offers bits of the melodies or motifs to be more fully developed later...a theological framework for understanding Jesus in his relationship to God and us.” (2)

We believe these waves of affirmation and this musical overture to the gospel to be composed of fragments of an early Christian hymn which sings the central message of the gospel: In Jesus Christ, the Word became flesh and took up residence in our midst, and the God who in sovereign mercy is *for* us has also determined in Jesus Christ to be *with* us. For God to be *with* us means that God’s grace is embodied in the here and now, in our own human history. What a wonderful way to begin a New Year, with this poetic, musical and powerful reminder that God’s grace is embodied in the here and now, in our own lives. In Jesus Christ, as John says, we have received grace upon grace.

Now, grace is one of those Christian catchwords that we all know the meaning of, and yet not one of us fully comprehends it. Look grace up in the dictionary to see how it’s defined in a few words and what you get is almost half a column! – beauty, good will, favor, a sense of what is right and proper, mercy, clemency, gratitude, thanks, attractive, a short prayer, granting a delay, a title of respect...and so on down to the eleventh definition where the dictionary says, “In theology – the unmerited love and favor of God toward humankind.” Among all those uses, it’s the theological definition that is hardest to grasp – especially that “unmerited” part – for folks who are so accustomed to earning what we make, working, achieving, and getting what we deserve.

One of the great Christian thinkers of the last century, Paul Tillich, described grace much more clearly than the dictionary when he wrote: “Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life which we loved or from which we were estranged...It strikes us when, year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a

wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, “you are accepted.”...Simply accept the fact that you are accepted! When that happens to us we experience grace.” (3)

This gospel says that in Christ we have received not just grace, but grace upon grace! Our acceptance is based upon a history of God’s favor to others. Upon the grace that was already present through the God of creation when the light was separated from the darkness and the seas and dry land appeared. Upon the grace that was already present through the God of Abraham and Sarah, and their faithful and wayward descendents. Upon the grace that was there when the prophets preached and the psalmist lamented and rejoiced. And most supremely in the flesh of a little baby, as God’s grace came closer than ever before. Grace upon grace. The grace of God is like a lamplighter poking holes in the darkness. We will never fully understand it. All we can do is try, from time to time, to let the beauty and the mystery of it settle in, and let go of the things to which we cling so tightly so that we can be open to receive it.

Bill Moyers’ documentary film on the hymn “Amazing Grace,” its history and significance, includes a scene filmed in Wembley Stadium in London some years ago. Various musical groups, mostly rock bands, had gathered together in celebration of the changes in South Africa, when the government sanctioned system of segregation under Apartheid finally came tumbling down. For twelve hours rock groups like Guns ‘n Roses played loudly over a huge crowd through banks of speakers, riling up fans already high on alcohol and rock music. The crowd would yell for more curtain calls; and the rock groups would oblige. But for some reason the promoters had chosen the highly acclaimed opera singer, Jessye Norman as the closing act. The film cuts back and forth between scenes of the unruly crowd in the stadium and Jessye Norman being interviewed about the significance of “Amazing Grace,” written, of course, by a slave trader who was converted from brutal cruelty to join the fight against slavery.

The interview ends, and finally the time comes for her to sing. A single circle of light follows Jessye Norman, this majestic African American woman wearing a flowing African caftan, as she strolls onstage. No backup band, no musical instruments, just Jessye. The crowd stirs, restless. Few seem to recognize the opera diva. A voice yells for more Guns ‘n Roses. Others take up the cry. Chaos seems on the brink. Then, alone, a cappella, Jessye Norman begins to sing very slowing: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” And a remarkable thing happened in Wembley Stadium that night. Seventy thousand raucous fans fell silent before her aria of grace. By the time Norman reached the second verse, “Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved...” she had the crowd in her hands. By the time she reached the third verse. “Tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home” several thousand fans were singing along, digging far back in nearly lost memories for words they heard long ago. “When we’ve been there ten thousand years bright shining as the sun...” Jessye Norman later confessed she had no idea what power had descended on Wembley Stadium that night.

But I think we know. The world hungers and thirsts for grace, and when grace descends, the world falls silent before it. Many of us reach the end of one year, and the beginning of another and look back with some fondness and a little sorrow. There are a lot of things we wished we had done or not done; many things for which we are profoundly grateful, and many things we regret we had come up against. We look ahead into the New Year, and we make our resolutions and plans, and hope for the best. But apart from anything of our own design, we also carry into the New Year a Christmas Gift that will not let us go. It is nothing we can achieve; it does not wait for our response. We cannot understand it fully, anymore than the dictionary can

adequately define it. As we look back, and as we look forward – it is pure gift: in Jesus Christ we have received grace upon grace. In him, we are accepted, loved and cherished by God. So on that gracious note: Happy New Year, everyone! AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B. The Gospel of John, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 4, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998, p. 2.
- 2) Robert Redmon's Theological Perspective, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009, p. 140.
- 3) A Chorus of Witnesses, Tom Long & Cornelius Platinga, editions, p. 92.