

Grace upon Grace

John 1:1-18

2nd Sunday of Christmas - January 3, 2016

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In the beginning ... before God created the heavens and the earth darkness covered the face of the earth, and God said, “let there be light” (Genesis 1:1-2).

In the beginning ... life and light came into being through the Word that was with God and was God. The light which is the life of all people, shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have received grace

upon grace (John 1:1-5, 14, 16).

We gather today at the beginning of a new year — AD/Anno Domini/the year of our Lord 2016 — according to the way time is counted in our society. Yet it is still Christmas: the tenth day of Christmas to be precise, the second and last Sunday of Christmas. Professor David Lose reminds us that Christmas isn’t just a season or a celebration, it’s a way of life. Christmas reminds us of God’s decision to become one of us, to share our mortal life so that we might enjoy God’s eternal life here and now and into eternity.¹ Christmas is God’s promise to never give up on what God has created. Christmas is God taking action to keep the light that is the life of all people shining in the darkness so that the darkness will not overcome it.

Christmas is a way of life that is marked by grace. In today’s gospel lesson we hear that Jesus Christ, God’s only unbegotten Son is full of grace and truth, that he gives grace and truth to the world, and that from his fullness we all receive grace upon grace. What is this grace, and how does it play out in our daily lives?

We begin by noting that grace is a quality or characteristic of God. Jesus is full of grace, according to our gospel writer. Not a surprise since he is the unbegotten son of the God who is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:7). The ancient Greek word we translate at grace is *charis* — a word meaning favor or goodwill. God’s grace, favor, and goodwill is all wrapped up with God’s unconditional love and mercy for humanity. Extravagant grace that moves God to become one of us, to share our joys and sorrows, our life and death. At Christmas we see God’s grace and favor poured out on the young peasant girl who became the mother of Christ, the reluctant carpenter who agreed to stand

¹ David Lose, “Christmas Continued” available at www.davidlose.net/2014/12/christmas-2-b-christmas-continued

as Jesus' father, the shepherds living in the fields, the wise men who follow the star. Divine grace will fill the adult Jesus and spill out on the people he heals, forgives, and cleanses with his touch. Divine grace will drive Jesus to the cross, to confront the powers of darkness that seek to control, limit and destroy the light within us. Divine grace triumphs in the resurrection of Jesus and his victory over the powers of sin, death and the devil.

This is why Scripture proclaims that we are saved by God's grace. It means that God has acted decisively and permanently in Jesus Christ to save and redeem us from the powers of darkness; to heal and restore, to reconcile us to ourselves and to God. Everything necessary for our salvation is done, accomplished by God's unconditional and extravagant grace two thousand and sixteen years ago, plus or minus a few.

But ... isn't our Lutheran mantra that we are saved by grace through faith? Don't we have to put our faith in Christ in order to be saved? It depends on what you imagine faith to be. Many people seem to think of faith as something we do, some decision we have to make that gives us access to God's grace, mercy and love. Let me remind you of Luther's explanation of the third article of the Apostles Creed: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with God's gifts, and made me holy.... Faith, then is not something we do, nor is it a decision we make. Faith is a combination of knowing about, believing in, and most of all trusting in and having confidence in what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. Faith is how we receive God's grace — by believing it and trusting in it. This faith is actually the work of the Holy Spirit. It emerges within us as we hear the good news, participate in the sacraments and the community of faith.

We are saved by grace through faith. What that means ultimately and finally is that human beings are not in charge of their relation to God; God is.² Our faith — our knowing and believing that God loves for us no matter what we do, our trust and confidence that God cares, our trust and confidence that God loves us even when we feel rejected and abandoned — is evidence of God's grace at work in our lives. It is grace upon grace poured out of the fullness of God's love for us, and it has a purpose — to affirm our identity as God's children, worthy of love and respect, capable of making a difference in the world.

This is the good news of Christmas that God became one of us, so that all of us — without exception — might experience this grace upon grace. Knowing and trusting that God's grace enables us to repent, to stay on the road to recovery, to try to be a better person, to expect a better tomorrow. Depending and relying on God's gracious and faithful presence empowers us to go into the world with open hearts and hands to do the work of Christmas all year long in our homes, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods and community.

Poet Howard Thurman describes the work of Christmas this way:

² Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther*, (Baker Academic, 2013, p. 84)

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
the rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

In the beginning before God created the heavens and the earth, darkness covered the face of the deep. In the beginning the God called light into being and made it the life of all people. In order to ensure that the darkness would never overcome the light, God became one of us filled with grace and truth. At the beginning of this year, 2016, we are called to do the work of Christmas bringing the light of Christ into the dark places of our lives and our world, so that all may experience grace upon grace. Let us make it so. Amen.