

Grace upon Grace

John 1:1-18

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My family enjoyed a vacation after Christmas in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. On New Year's Day we did what a lot of people do in our little community and climbed Montreat's Lookout Mountain. It's a popular hike because it is not too long (Even a young child can make the climb with a little help.), but after you navigate that last steep turn, you are rewarded with stunning views from the top. I have loved that mountain since I was a child and have climbed it in every season—in the spring when the ferns on the wooded floor begin to unfurl, in the summer when deep greens blanket the rolling hills in a serene peace, and in the fall when the hardwoods of those oldest mountains in the world are stunning in their colors.

But through the years, I have discovered it is the winter hikes I like the best, because in winter you can see through the trees to a multi-layered beauty of those mountain contours. You see the skyline meet the treetops; and except for the occasional evergreen, you see the bare branches of individual trees reaching toward the others like old friends. You see roof tops that are invisible in summer and the Blue Ridge Parkway far across the valley.

This New Year's Day was so clear we could see all the way to Mount Mitchell, the tallest mountain east of the Mississippi River, and we could see other roads we have walked, winding their way up and across a distant ground to other far off peaks. From one vantage point we could see many layers of beauty and reality.

Likewise, the gospel of John opens with a multi-layered vista. With echoes of Genesis, the opening verses tease our imaginations to look back to the beginning of the story of God and God's people, *In the beginning was the Word*, and to look forward toward what is being revealed in the person of Jesus Christ—light, power, glory, truth, grace upon grace. If any literary prologue opens a story by establishing the setting and giving the essential background details as it prepares the reader for the plot about to unfold, then John's prologue is saying that all we know about God from our long history of salvation is culminating in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is God's love overflowing, grace upon grace.

The story is told about the Scottish poet and novelist, Robert Louis Stevenson, that when he 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 unfathomable mystery of God. 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

You can tell, no one metaphor is big enough to contain what is being revealed.

We believe these layers of meaning that compose the beginning of John's gospel are fragments of an early Christian hymn which sings its central message; in Jesus Christ, the great God of all creation took up residence in our midst. The God who people had long believed is *for* us, has chosen in Christ to be *with* us. God's grace is embodied in the here and now, in our own human history. Now grace is one of those Christian catchwords that we all understand to a point, and yet, not one of us fully comprehends it.

I looked up the word *grace* in the dictionary to see how it's defined in a few words, and I found almost half a column of definition: 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. The eleventh definition says, "In theology—the unmerited love and favor of God toward humankind." Among all those uses, the theological definition is hardest to grasp, especially that "unmerited" part for folks like us who are so accustomed to earning what we make, working, achieving, and trying to get what we think we deserve.

One of the great Christian thinkers of the last century, Paul Tillich, described grace narratively and 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. You are accepted*, Tillich concluded. *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 long 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 from the dry land. 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 psalmists lamented and rejoiced. Upon all of the grace that came before, grace came in the flesh of Jesus, and it came closer than ever before. Grace upon grace. 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. All we can do is let go of the things to which we cling so tightly, so that we can be open to receive it overflowing from the hands of God.

Nelson Mandela's death before Christmas reminded the world of a time when hope seemed particularly alive and the future appeared brighter, when South Africa's struggle for freedom began to dismantle the legalized oppression of Apartheid. During that time, Bill Moyers produced a documentary on the hymn "Amazing Grace," its history and significance. The film includes a scene from London's Wembley Stadium, where various musical groups, mostly rock bands, had gathered together in celebration

of the changes in South Africa, when the government-sanctioned walls of segregation finally came tumbling down.

For twelve hours groups like Guns 'n Roses played loudly over a huge crowd through banks of speakers, riling up fans. The crowd would yell for more curtain calls, and the rock groups would oblige. The concert 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 by a slave trader who was converted from brutal cruelty to join the fight against slavery, it was the perfect song to end this concert, 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 slowly: "*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, digging back into nearly lost memories for words they heard long ago. Jessye Norman later confessed she had no idea what power had descended on Wembley Stadium that night.⁴

But I think we know. The world hungers and thirsts for grace, the unmerited love and favor of God, and when we recognize it, the world falls silent before it.⁵ 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 wish we had done or not done, many things for which we are profoundly grateful, and things we regret we had to come up against. We look ahead, we make our resolutions, and we pray that this or that will change – in our lives, in the world; and we hope for the best.

But apart from anything of our own doing or design, apart from anything we can achieve, apart from any response we make, we are—each of us—like a little child being baptized. We cannot understand God's grace fully, anymore than the dictionary can adequately define it. But we can look back, and we can look forward and trust it comes as pure gift: in Jesus Christ we have received grace upon grace. In him, as in no other, we are accepted, loved, forgiven, protected, and companioned by God. Grace upon grace indeed.

Notes

1 Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 4 (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 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), 140.

3 Paul Tillieh, "You Are Accepted," *The Shaking of Foundation* (London: SCM Press, 1949), 162.

4 Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 281.

5 Yancey, 282.