

“Grace upon Grace”

Ephesians 1: 3-14, John 1: 1-18

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Today marks the beginning of the season of Epiphany. Epiphany is more than the day we hear of the Magi’s visit to the Christ child. It is a whole season that lasts until Ash Wednesday when we begin the season of Lent. Why then did we not read that more accessible, more “human” story of those travelers from afar and sing the carol that commemorates their story? If you were here last Sunday you know that we shared the Magi’s story last week, so today we explore the incarnation through the poetry of John’s Gospel. There is a whole season of Epiphany, and many ways to speak about Jesus being made known, or shown, in the world. John’s elegant poem, or hymn, is one of those epiphany texts that show us who Jesus is.

There are no angels in this story; there is no baby, no visitors, and no strangely awkward place for a child to come into the world. John begins at the very beginning of time. Jesus was present at the beginning as the Logos, the Word that would be made flesh. God now chooses to dwell among us in the flesh, in the person of Jesus, the one who will be light in our darkness, the one who brings peace. God is no longer the transcendent One, distant and inaccessible, the one whom we can not taste or touch or see. In the person of Jesus, God comes to be with us, our Emmanuel. Richard Burridge says, “The point of this text is that the transcendent, beyond-words God took on flesh, came to us, found us, sought us out, took on our own existence, with its pain, its sorrows, its vulnerability and its joys.” In fact, many scholars say John’s text reminds us that in the person of Jesus, “God pitched a tent” in our midst, a very down to earth image for such a hard to grasp concept.

God pitches a tent in our midst. Not just for a moment. Not so there will be a place for the Christ child to be born. God takes up residence among us forever. From the moment of incarnation, there is no going back. In Jesus we will come to know who God is, what God is like, what God calls us to become. There is no more speculation, no more conjecture. God chooses to become one of us, in all our glory, in all our messiness, God is one of us.

I imagine some people might wish to keep God at a distance. It is easier to wonder about a God that remains mysterious, than to be confronted by the God who is right in front of us. In Jesus, God is no longer distant, no longer abstract. Jesus shows us who God is, and John says, in this encounter with the down-to-earth deity, we have received, “grace upon grace.” This phrase lays the foundation for a theology of abundance. This is no stingy God. Through Jesus we all receive blessing upon blessing, grace upon grace. These blessings were not merely for those early believers. Indeed John wrote to a community where blessings were scarce, and challenges were plenty. The thought of believing in one who would make their lives easier, who would provide for all their needs, who would bestow blessing upon blessing was not easy. However, this message is for all who believe, then and now.

God has been generous from the beginning. It is God's very nature to be generous, to be gracious, compassionate and just. Therefore we are to be likewise with the rest of the world. Perhaps this is a hard message to receive in difficult times. It is not always easy to be generous when unemployment is high and bank accounts are dwindling. In such times, we tend to mistrust God's abundance, to become more closed, more suspicious, and less generous. In Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage the word generous is used again and again, "generous inside and out, trust from start to finish... We all live off this generous bounty, gift after gift after gift. We got the basics from Moses, and then this exuberant giving and receiving." (The Message)

We can make our way faithfully through difficult times when we trust in God's abundance. If we can trust there is more than enough of what our spirits need most—forgiveness and reconciliation, grace, life, truth, joy, generosity, healing justice—then perhaps we can believe there is more than enough of what our bodies need as well: food, water, land, clothing and shelter. We must not separate our spiritual needs from our physical needs. When we do not attend to our spiritual lives, if we mistrust God's amazing abundance, we act from a place of fear and scarcity. Yet God came to dwell among us, body and soul, spiritual and physical. Whenever we separate the sacred from the secular or the spiritual and physical aspects of our being, we become angry or jealous or inhospitable. When we see ourselves as integrated beings, where the spiritual informs all that we do then we act very differently. Every encounter becomes holy and everyone with whom we come in contact becomes the manifestation of God's love.

In response to God's amazing generosity we become more generous, more empathetic, more compassionate and loving. We become more Christ-like. Where there is need we find a way to meet it. Where there is pain we find some way to ease it. Where there is loneliness, we accompany the one who feels alone. Where there is darkness, we bring the light. Our words become flesh. That is how the incarnation continues beyond this child whom we welcome this day. God's love is made manifest in all of us. A prayer attributed to St. Theresa of Avila says it well: "Christ has no body but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion must look out on the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now."

God did not take the trouble to come to earth to live among us so that we might remain on the sidelines, fans but never participants. God calls us to jump in, Hokey Pokey style, with our whole selves. That is how God is with us, heaping upon us grace, upon grace upon grace, gift upon gift upon gift. God does not hold back. God does not worry that there will not be enough. God does not distinguish between who is worthy and who is truly worthy. We are all equal recipients of God's amazing blessings. Therefore, we are to become a "grace upon grace" kind of people.

What difference does this incarnation make in your life? Is John's story more than beautiful poetry? God sent Jesus into the world to be the embodiment of grace and truth. Those who came to believe this truth were transformed. Many who were challenged by it would seek to eliminate him. However, this Truth was from God and could never be

defeated. This Truth was a light in the darkest night, and could never be extinguished. God calls us to embody this Word, to en flesh this Truth, not just on some days but every day. In her *Feasting on the Word* commentary, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about bringing “a” word to life, some word that each one of us “has a gift for bringing to life,” whether that word is compassion, justice, generosity, patience or love. She says, “Until someone acts upon these words, they remain abstract concepts—very good ideas that few people have ever seen. The moment someone acts on them, the words become flesh. They live among us, so we can see their glory.”

That is how John’s word moves from being beautiful poetry to Gospel. The word, whether that word is love or grace or forgiveness or generosity or peace comes alive through us. The moment we risk acting on our faith wisdom migrates from head to heart and transforms us into the body of Christ. No one will have to ask if you are a follower of this one who has become flesh. You will be for the world grace upon grace upon grace and everyone will see it. People will know that Truth dwells within this community by the way we welcome and serve and share God’s love. God came to dwell among us full of grace and truth. I pray that as we begin another year, we may receive the holy One with that same grace and truth. Amen.