

## ***Grace Upon Grace***

A Sermon Preached by the  
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Jeremiah 31:7-14  
John 1:1-18

One of my favorite preachers always says, “It seems that nothing is as over as Christmas when it’s over.” And here we are, almost at the end, on the Eleventh Day of Christmas, when my true love gave to me, Eleven Pipers Piping. We already have the partridge, the turtle doves, French hens, birds, geese, swans, and presumably golden rings, milkmaids, dancing ladies, leaping lords, and we’re expecting the drummers tomorrow. It’s been a full holiday so far, don’t you think? Even those of us who only managed to get the little “Charlie Brown” tree on the coffee table will probably leave it in place until Epiphany on Tuesday, and then we will move into the new year, putting away the decorations, packing away the nativity sets, throwing out the last of the Christmas cookies that nobody will ever eat, leaving the memories of Christmas past in the dust – or in our case, the slush.

Some of us have probably already made (and perhaps broken) our New Year’s resolutions. The Marist College Institute for Public Opinion reported that of the 1,000 people they surveyed, twenty percent of them still said losing weight was at the top of their list, followed by the sixteen percent who want to quit smoking, and the twelve percent who vowed to spend less and save more – which knocked “be a better person” right out of the top three down into seventh place, surely a reflection of the current economic difficulties we’re all facing.

And if we have New Year’s family or cultural traditions, we’ve celebrated those by now. My southern friends had the black-eyed peas on the stove, and I’ve already made the traditional New Mexican *posole*, or green chili soup, that we have every year. *The New York Times* reported an amusing collection of New Year’s traditions, including the Danish one of jumping off chairs at the stroke of midnight, literally jumping into the new year; and, perhaps my favorite, the Venezuelan tradition of giving each other yellow underwear to wear into the new year for good luck.

This is the day in the church calendar when we stand right in the middle of the turning page. We have a choice: we can either jump ahead to Epiphany and read the passage from Matthew about the wise men making their way by the light of a single star to the stable in Bethlehem, and then having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod with the news of the child’s birth, they go home by different road.

Or we can look back to Christmas, and let John tell the story one more time. But not with charming accounts of singing angels and stunned shepherds, not with the birth of a baby in a stable or a villain named Herod or heroes like the

Magi. Not with the genealogy of Jesus dating back to Adam or even Abraham, but back to the very beginning, before the beginning of time, when God looked out on the chaos, the nothingness, and said, “Let there be light.” In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and in that Word was light and life.

If John’s gospel were the only one, that would be all we know of Jesus’ birth, and, in spite of John’s beautiful poetry, some of us would find it lacking. Writer and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says, “(we would know that) before his name was Jesus, his name was the Word, and he was with God from the very beginning of creation, bringing things into being, making things happen, shining light into the darkness. He was God’s self, God’s soul, God’s life-force in the world, invisible and indispensable. He was the breath inside all living things. He was the electric spark that charged their hearts. He was the fire inside the sun, the space between the stars, the axis around which the galaxies spun. He was God’s message to the world, and the message was life. The message was light.”<sup>1</sup>

If we’re honest, most of us – myself included – prefer the stories that Matthew and Mark and Luke tell about this light coming into the world. It’s hard for us to get our heads around the poetic language that John uses to describe of the incarnation. Some have tried to help us interpret it in art or music. I especially like the lines from Leonard Bernstein’s 1971 *Mass* that capture some connotations of the Word in John’s prologue:

“(You can) smother hope before it’s risen  
Watch is wizen like a gourd,  
But you cannot imprison  
The Word of the Lord . . .  
. . . So we wait in silent treason until reason is restored  
And we wait for the season of the Word of the Lord.  
We await the season of the Word of the Lord  
We wait. . . we wait for the Word of the Lord.”

But even that doesn’t quite fit, doesn’t quite speak our language.

Ah, but then we come to the part of the Gospel that explains it all, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth.” The miracle of the Word made flesh: that God decided to deliver the message in person by becoming one of us.

One of the commentaries I consulted remembered a scene in the Pulitzer prize-winning play, *The Green Pastures*, by the late Marc Connelly, who imagined it something like this. God is looking out over the earth, trying to decide what to do about the sinful situation there. The angel Gabriel enters and asks, “Lord, has the time come for me to blow the trumpet?” “No, no, not yet,” says God. But as God continues to fret and worry, Gabriel offers some suggestions. What about sending someone to take care of it. How about another David or Moses? Or, Gabriel says, “You could send one of the prophets: Isaiah or Jeremiah. There are lots of great prophets up here. What do you think?” Without

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Full of Grace and Truth,” *Pulpit Resource*, January 2, 2000, p. 4.

looking back at Gabriel, God says, “I’m not going to send anyone. This time I’m going myself.”

The miracle of the Word made flesh. Literally God “tabernacling” – or pitching a tent in our midst. Right where we are, so that all we know about God, we know from this Word made flesh, this Word that is a way of life; not simply a figure of speech, or glorious poetry – although it is all of that as well – but how we come to know God through the Word made flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Emmanuel, God with us.

When we come to the end of one year, we sometimes wonder where God was as that year unfolded. 2008 was probably no exception, especially given the end of the year global financial disasters. *The New York Times* reported yesterday that all told \$7 trillion had been lost by investors. It seemed that unconscionable greed took over as we watched the Wall Street bailout and the auto industry come only slightly closer to eating humble pie, while the rest of us choked on our meager plum pudding. And just where did Bernie Madoff put that \$50 million?

And while most news sources agree that the American Presidential election and the financial meltdown were the two biggest news stories of 2008, we also remember that 70,000 people died – many of them children – and 5 million were left homeless when an earthquake hit China in May; that terrorist attacks continue, notably the one that took 164 lives in Mumbai just a month or so ago; that there were cyclones in Myanmar and hurricanes that wreaked deadly damage in the Caribbean and the U.S. Gulf Coast; and that the United Nations reported that because of rising food prices, another 75 million people are now below the hunger threshold, bring the estimated number of undernourished people worldwide to almost 1 billion. There was a brief but bloody war between Russia and Georgia in August, there is growing violence in Afghanistan, and a continuing struggle in Iraq. And as we turn the page, the Middle East once again simmers towards a boil as Israel launches a ground offensive into Gaza, and Hamas continues to retaliate. The walk for clean water in Mauretania grows increasingly longer, there are pirates off the coast of Somalia preventing food and medical supplies from reaching those who need them, the cholera epidemic has claimed over 1,500 lives in Zimbabwe, and more than 30,000 people are now diagnosed with the disease in that country.

Even if we trust that God is with us, even if we believe the promise of Christmas, it’s hard to know sometimes just exactly where God is. Maybe we have to follow the star back to Bethlehem and stay just another day or two to remind ourselves that if we want to know what God looks like, we need to grow up with that baby in the manger.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells us that, “This Word is not a unit of speech, but. . . a certain way of being that speaks louder than words. This Word does not deliver medical lectures to sick people; this Word heals them. This Word does not hand out neatly printed recipe cards to hungry people; this Word feeds them. This Word does not leave inspirational tracts lying on the bedside tables of those who are dying; this Word raises them from the dead.”

In the incarnate Word, in Jesus, word and reality become one thing. “If you want to know what God looks like, look at Jesus. If you want to know how God

sounds, listen to him. If you want to know how God acts, watch him. This is God's word in action" and it is the only way that we can truly know and embrace the God who stepped into our world, who pitched a tent and stayed a while. This is the God who stays with us in our despair, who walks with us through difficult decisions and hears the sad news with us, the One whose tears are the first to fall when we face the death of someone we love, the One who embodies hope in a world that sometimes seems hopeless.

Last year at this time, we looked ahead at the year before us, 2008, and I suggested that we would probably be asking some hard questions before the year was over about our ministry and mission here in Bloomington. We don't have as much volunteer support as we once had, as we now need. I said that we were going to have to be very creative about finding ways to support the budget, or face some difficult choices in the next year. If you've gotten your newsletter for January, you already know all of that.

But you also know that God is still there in the flesh in the hands that distribute hundreds of pounds of food at VEAP, in the hands that bring meals to the homebound, and welcome others to dinner at Loaves and Fishes. God is there in the flesh in the volunteers who work with our Homework Connection program, in those who are here every Wednesday night for Logos, and in those who travel to different parts of the world on mission trips. God is there in the flesh as we welcome one another to the communion table this morning. Look around. Grace upon grace upon grace.

On Epiphany Sunday last year, I shared the words of a wonderful benediction by Harold Warheim, which a member of the Evening Star Circle recently put in my mailbox, so it must be time to hear it again.

"Because the world is poor and starving,  
Go with bread.  
Because the world is filled with fear,  
Go with courage.  
Because the world is in despair,  
Go with hope.  
Because the world is living lies,  
Go with truth.  
Because the world is sick with sorrow,  
Go with joy.  
Because the world is weary of wars,  
Go with peace.  
Because the world is under judgment,  
Go with mercy.  
Because the world will die without it,  
Go with love."

The Word became flesh and lived among us, . . . full of grace and truth. God is still with us. Happy New Year! Amen.