

# “Grace Upon Grace”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 4, 2009*

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas

Psalm 147:1-11

Rev. John Wahl

John 1:1-18

As a boy of maybe eight or ten years old, we went on a summer, family vacation to the North Carolina coast – visiting Kitty Hawk – site of the Wright Brothers flight – and to the beaches of Nags Head. If you’ve been there, you know there are, close by, sand dunes which – at least in my young eyes – seemed to virtually reach the sky. We spent one afternoon climbing on those sand dunes – my two brothers and I – ignoring the pleas of our parents to slow down or wait for them at the next summit. While climbing, we came to learn that upon reaching each peak, there would appear ahead and above us yet another one. On some of those ascents, we would run with vigor, sure that we were finally about to reach the top. On others, we would trudge along, understanding that false optimism had gotten us before, wary of expending all our energy too soon. All around us was nothing but sun and sand, and the driving hope that if we kept going up, eventually we would reach the top – wherever that happened to be on that shifting, sandy mountain.

This prologue to John’s gospel tells us about the Word entering the world, of light interrupting the darkness, even though many in the darkened world will not immediately recognize the light. John describes what we have received through this gift of Word in terms of fullness – that the Word reveals the Father’s glory “full of grace and truth;” and that “from his fullness, we have all received, grace upon grace.”

I hear this last statement – about receiving grace upon grace – as meaning there are, in life, multiple revelations in Christ that, only together, show the fullness of God. Like running up the sand dunes, the first glimpse you get of God in Christ Jesus is not complete. Life is full of ever-shifting peaks and valleys and we respond with bursts of energy, followed by necessary periods of rest and recovery. With each new day and each new experience, God can be viewed by a new angle by seeing the Word from a different perspective.

“The Word became flesh and lived among us.” Not only did God in Christ bridge the chasm between the creator and the created, but took on the full dimensions of birth, life and death; of time, relationship and depth of understanding. I love the image of the Greek text here, literally that the Word *tabernacled* among us. In the days of the Old Testament, when the Hebrew people were wandering nomads, they would set aside one of their tents to be sacred and holy. That tent was known as the tabernacle: not because it looked different from the other tents – it had no steeple or stained glass – but because it had been set apart for a specific purpose. All that separated the ordinary from the holy was the thin material of the tent walls; something much too weak to contain the living God. But, God had chosen to dwell among them; to travel with them; to be a sanctuary from the world – a place set apart – but also a tangible reminder of God’s presence with them.

John Claypool writes: “As the Word made flesh, Jesus gives visible, tangible ways of understanding the invisible and intangible. God became what we are so that we could have a better glimpse into what God is. This gift of vision – our glimpses of God in Jesus – is the essence of grace.”<sup>1</sup>

How is it then, and why, that when we look at Christ – and at the church that is gathered in his name – so many people do not see glimpses of God? Over Thanksgiving, when I visited my mother’s house in Kentucky, it was the first time in over a year that my boys and their cousins had all been together at the same time. Understandably, they sought to spend as much time as possible with each other over those few days, which came to include the sleeping arrangements. So, on Wednesday night, while the grown-ups stayed awake to prepare for the next day’s meal, six cousins – representing three households, all between the ages of five and nine – lay down for bed on the couches and air mattresses that had been set up for them in the basement. As you might imagine, this was not a seamless process. One wanted one type of music on, another asked for a different kind of music, the others wanted none. Some wanted the light in the bathroom to stay on, others wanted it on but the door shut, and one – my son – wanted complete darkness.

Well, wouldn’t you know, by about midnight, only one of those six cousins was still in the basement – asleep – with the music still on but the lights all out. The others had been moved to other bedrooms with comfortable levels of sound and light. And the next night, four tried to sleep in the basement again and three made it. And the next night, our last one there, a tired bunch of cousins all chose to sleep in the bedrooms; that night the basement was empty.

“To behold God,” someone has said, “is to be a recipient of wave after wave of divine generosity.”<sup>2</sup> And yet, we are sometimes so accustomed to the darkness, that our eyes need time to adjust to the light of Christ. We may think that God can be recognized by the misdeeds or missteps of those who have used the divine name to support selfish or malicious goals. Where can God be seen in the actions of the bloodthirsty Crusaders, or manipulative missionaries, or abusive clergy? Where has God chosen to tabernacle when innocents suffer from disease, tragedy or natural disaster?

The answer is always the same. God is with us. The Word became flesh and came to dwell among us. That has not changed. When we look at Christ, we can come to recognize his love and compassion that is a full reflection of God. I can envision Christ’s grace upon grace – that wave after wave of divine generosity – only because I have now climbed to one peak and seen that there is yet another before me. I am growing to see it more clearly, to recognize it from different angles, because of the valleys, because of the sleepless nights that have turned to morning. As the old hymn goes, “Twas grace that brought me safe thus far; and grace will lead me home.”

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<sup>1</sup> John Claypool, “God Became What We Are”

<sup>2</sup> Beverly Gaventa in *Texts for Preaching: Lectionary Year B*

But, when we become aware of the light, when we realize that wave after wave of God's generosity has been washing over us, we realize that the gift given to us is not one for us to keep. Gradually, over time, we come to understand that the Word is meant to be spoken, explained, and shared. As Tom Steagald writes: "The Word became flesh so that our flesh might become God's word – the bearer and best evidence of God's compassion – offered through us to a broken and lonely world."<sup>3</sup>

When you come to the Lord's Table this morning, think about how what you receive can also be what you give. That in being fed, you are being called to feed others. That in experiencing grace, you are called to reflect Christ's graciousness. That through your standing with sisters and brothers in the faith, you are called to love and honor one another – including your family – like you are members of the same family, children of the same God and Father, who want to climb with one another to the next summit, who want to stay together – even if not for slumber parties – and even if it doesn't work out on your first try. The Word became flesh so that our flesh might become God's word – his good news – the bearer and best evidence of God's compassion. AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Steagald, "Flesh Made Word" from *Blogging Toward Sunday*