

First Reading is from Psalm 96:1-9

- ¹ O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
- ² Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- ³ Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.
- ⁴ For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
- ⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
- ⁶ Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
- ⁷ Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- ⁸ Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
- ⁹ Worship the LORD in holy splendor;
tremble before him, all the earth.

This Christmas Eve I turn to a text that is rarely if ever read, let alone used as the source document for a Christmas meditation! Commentator David Schafer writes, “Poor Titus! The Revised Common Lectionary only lets him out for public reading once a year – when he is sure to be upstaged by shepherds, angels and a baby lying in a manger!” As I read the opening line of Titus tonight, you’ll understand why, for tonight our candle has been named “Grace”! Listen now for God’s word to us as we celebrate the wondrous birth of Jesus:

Second Reading is from Titus 2:1-11, 3:4-7

^{2:11} For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹² training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are ***self-controlled, upright, and godly***, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are ***zealous for good deeds***.

^{3:4} But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, ***not because of any works of righteousness that we had done***, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. ⁶ This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Christmas Meditation: Grace Mends

Have you ever deserved a reprimand, discipline or punishment that you didn’t get either as a child or an adult? I remember one crisp clear night when I was extremely exhausted. My corporate job had been grueling, given the corporate downsizing that was underway. Dinner had been a drive-through, because a traffic accident had jammed the freeway route home from downtown LA. From a long day at work, a tedious drive home and drive through-food, I went

straight to church for an orchestra rehearsal where moods were anything but festive. As we rehearsed I thought to myself, "I can't wait to get home."

So, as soon as the rehearsal was over I jumped in my car and took off. I headed for the freeway driving a couple of miles before I exited just minutes from home. I sat impatiently at a red light only to have the driver in the car in front of me forget he had a gas pedal when the light turned green. I impatiently inched forward, but when the lane next to me opened up, I made a quick lane change and then another to get ahead of the slow poke. I pressed the pedal down and zoomed off down the street, but before I had a chance to get very far lights were flashing in my rearview mirror. "Really," I said out loud to myself. I just wanted to get home!

When the officer tapped on my window I had to tell him that my purse was in the hatchback area of my car on top of my violin case. He asked me to get out of the car and open the hatchback. I did as I was directed making it clear that the case was a violin case! As the hatchback went up another officer pulled up behind us. Now not one but two police officers were involved.

With the hatchback up and permission granted to grab my purse, I finally handed my driver's license to the officer. He looked at my license, did the required checks and then came back from his cruiser to recount my quick maneuvers once the light turned green, declaring my violation as unsafe lane changes. Oh, I wasn't going to get home anytime soon, I could tell. I am sure my body language was flashing like a neon sign saying that I was guilty as charged, because I was!

What happened next though surprised me. Instead of asking for my signature, the officer said, "Well, I really couldn't see how close you were to the other vehicles when you changed lanes. It looked unsafe from my perspective, but I couldn't say for sure. Why don't you just get back in your car and drive home a little slower? I want you to get home safely tonight, so that you can enjoy the holiday in a couple of days." To this day, I remember that moment as sheer grace, for it was totally unmerited.

What I also remember is that as I pulled away from the curb, I was no longer exhausted. I was incredibly grateful as well as energized. I was committed to driving more safely, not letting my frustrations and exhaustion get the best of me behind the wheel. The unmerited grace of that officer transformed the experience of my entire day; I saw it through the lens of grace.

I experienced Anne Lamott's wisdom about grace, for she wrote, "I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."

I don't know what messes are present in your life tonight. I don't know if there is something that you did that you should not have done, or if there is something that you just can't forgive yourself for. I don't know if someone has betrayed you, or if there is anger locked somewhere deep inside you. I don't know if there is a friendship or family relation that has soured or embittered your soul. I don't know if you have left something undone that has caused someone else pain. I don't know if failed love or broken promises have hardened your heart. I don't know what yearnings you have this holy night for things to be different than they are. I don't know what mending your life needs right now.

What I do know is this: my experience of grace that crisp clear night gives me a partial understanding of the miraculous grace of God we come together tonight to celebrate. Grace that comes outrageously wrapped for us in bands of cloth lying in a manger. Grace that was surprisingly announced by an angelic chorus to lowly shepherds in a field. Grace that guided magi

from the east to bring gifts to a child in a Bethlehem stable. Grace that unexpectedly meets us wherever we are - no matter where we are - but does not leave us where it found us.

You see this grace is not static; it is dynamic. It doesn't leave us in our messes; it offers us the possibility of transformation. This miraculous grace known to us through Jesus Christ has the power to mend whatever messes plague our lives, our communities of faith and even this world of ours. As Kahled Hosseini penned in his bestseller *The Kite Runner*, "There is a way to be good again."

This babe foretold by an angel and born of Mary, welcomed by Joseph and announced by angels offers us a way to be good again. This babe doesn't alter our past; this babe redeems it, opening for us the possibility that our pasts do not have to determine or predict the flow of our futures. Did you hear that? Our pasts do not have to determine or predict our futures. The grace of God appeared so that you and you and you and I might be good again, forgiven and freed by grace to live into the goodness and loving-kindness God intends for us.

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all," says Paul to Titus. This salvation though is not for us to keep wrapped up just for ourselves. This salvation is to be a gift we claim and then generously share with others. Paul reminds Titus that the grace of God appeared to make disciples energetic with goodness, with zeal for good works. You see recipients of this miraculous grace, are to become bearers of this grace into the world.

Listen to what the psalmist has to say to us, "O sing to the Lord a new song." Sing a new song, not play our old broken records of lives filled with self-centered passions. Sing a new song, not play our old broken records of past mistakes and regrets. Sing a new song, not play our old broken records of "could have, should have, would have". No, we are to sing a new song, a brand-new song born of the grace we have received in Jesus Christ. The past is past, for we are new creations in Christ.

The question for us this night is this: Do we believe this? Do we believe and then desire to live into this miraculous outrageous grace offered us through Jesus Christ?

If we do, then we should be guided by Dr. Howard Thurman's poetry everyday of every year:

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 flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost,
 To heal the broken,
 To feed the hungry,
 To release the prisoner,
 To rebuild the nations,
 To bring peace among brothers [and sisters],
 To make music in the heart.

Friends, I don't know what needs mending in your life. Yet, I do know that the grace of God has the energy to mend whatever needs mending. On this silent and holy night, let us receive and then bear the grace of God revealed to us through Jesus Christ into this broken and hurting world. Amen.