

## The Grace of God Appeared

Titus 2:11-14

In the timeless holiday classic, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, there's a scene where Charlie Brown, frustrated by all the commercialism of Christmas that all his friends, and even his dog Snoopy, seem to have embraced, throws up his hands and cries, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?!"

His pal, Linus answers Charlie Brown's plea by reciting words from the Gospel of Luke. Words that we have heard, over and over until we know the story by heart. Of shepherds being visited by angels, who explain that a savior is being born into the world. Not a savior whose birth would be in some far-off palace or temple. But a savior who would be born in their neighborhood. In Bethlehem. In a manger, no less. And that these shepherds could go see for themselves, and touch this savior child with their own hands. After he finishes, Linus turns to his friend and says, "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

Well, ... maybe.

I mean, just about everybody knows about Joseph and Mary, angels and shepherds, Bethlehem, and of course, the baby Jesus. We know the story. But what do we know about the meaning of Jesus' birth? What would this baby have to do with peace on earth and good will towards all people?

It might have been helpful if Linus had also read from another scripture passage, one that is far less familiar to people than Luke's nativity story. He might have read from another passage we heard tonight. In the Epistle of Titus, are these words:

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to us all."

The grace of God has appeared.

Now, if you look up the word *grace* in a dictionary, one definition you will find would be this: *Grace is the freely given, unmerited favor and love of God.* The freely given unmerited favor and love of God.

Grace, by that definition, is invisible, isn't it? It's a concept, an idea. Like other ideas such as hope, peace, joy, and love; the names given to the advent candles. We can't see any of those things either. At best, we catch glimpses of them when we see them acted out in human lives. We can't see joy, except in the face of another person. We cannot touch love, except in the embrace of another. How then can the grace of God possibly *appear* to us, when we can neither see God's face, nor touch God's hand?

What *is* Christmas really all about? It is about the assurance that when Jesus was born in Bethlehem's manger, he embodied the grace of God – God's freely given unmerited favor and love – for all the world to see.

There's a fancy theological term for this – Incarnation. Which comes from the Latin word "to make flesh." In the birth of Jesus, God's grace appeared in the flesh; God's grace was dressed in skin and bone so that we could see with our own eyes that which our imagination could scarcely comprehend. That God's favor, God's love, is given, not earned.

Jesus' life was grace in motion. As if that were not enough, the passage from Titus goes on to say that as we receive the grace that appeared in Jesus, our own lives come to personify God's grace for others to see.

From the beginning of Advent, this year our theme has been "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." We have been intentional in our remembering that even though our Advents are most often experienced in hustling and bustling our way to Christmas,

Advent is really about waiting, if it is about anything. Most years we work hard at not forgetting what Advent truly is meant to be. We keep the Christmas carols waiting in the wings like gifts wrapped and placed under the tree; knowing they are there but restraining ourselves from opening them until Christmas morning. We patiently open each window of our Advent calendars.

This year, our efforts to experience the Advent aura of waiting, found an unexpected ally. A pandemic...that literally placed the world—including our cherished yuletide traditions—on hold. That kept us waiting at every turn. Waiting for vaccines. Waiting for the numbers of sick and dying and deceased to diminish to a vanishing point. Waiting for reopening and regathering.

And in the relatively obscure Epistle to Titus, far from the beaten paths of shepherds and wisemen, we get a glimpse over Advent's horizon to a view of what it is we have been waiting for more than anything, even if we were not fully present to it. And what our hearts truly expected and anticipated, was a sighting of God's grace. A light piercing the darkness of this year. Then suddenly, more than an expectation--an appearance! Not just anticipation—but arrival! The grace of God *appeared* one night in Bethlehem. The grace of God continues to appear this morning in Westminster and wherever people allow the spirit of Christ to be incarnated through them.

A man named Louis Cassels wrote "The Parable of the Birds", which is a story that illustrates the appearance of God's grace that we celebrate at Christmas. Once upon a time, there was a man who looked upon Christmas as a lot of humbug. He wasn't a Scrooge. To the contrary, he was a very kind and decent person, generous to his family, upright in all his dealings with other people. But he didn't believe all that magical nonsense and wishful thinking about God becoming man, which churches proclaim at Christmas. Why would God want to do something like that? So when his family left to attend midnight services on Christmas Eve, he stayed home. Shortly after the family drove away a heavy snow began to fall.

Sometime later, as he was reading his newspaper by the fire, he was startled by a thudding sound that was quickly followed by another. Then another. When he went to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter had tried to fly through the window. "I can't let these poor creatures lie there and freeze," he thought. "But how can I help them?" Then he remembered the barn. It would provide a warm shelter. He quickly put on his coat and boots and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on the light. But the birds didn't come in. "Food will bring them in," he thought. So, he hurried back to the house for bread crumbs, which he sprinkled on the snow to make a trail into the barn. To his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow. He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around and waving his arms. They scattered in every direction -- except into the warm, lighted barn.

Whatever he tried to do to save them, the birds interpreted as threatening. He asked himself, "what can I do to let them know they can trust me?" "If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety." Just at that moment the church bells began to ring. He stood silently for awhile, listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. Then he sank to his knees in the snow.

"Now I understand," he whispered. And then raising his head and shouting so as to let his voice be heard through the darkness and falling snow and all the way to Heaven's threshold-- "Now I understand why You had to do it." And *that*, Charlie Brown, is what Christmas is all about.

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