

Liturgical Day: The Nativity of Our Lord; Christmas Day
Date: December 25, 2006
Sermon Title: Grace and Peace

If the traditional Christmas Eve greeting is, "Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night" perhaps the traditional Christmas morning greeting ought to be: "Merry Christmas to all and to all a good morning." On the other hand, if that gets you thinking too much about Santa Claus and too little about Jesus, or too much about gifts and too little about faith, then perhaps we ought to begin as we always do: "Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen."

Grace and peace. That is the way I always begin my sermons. Hopefully, the message of grace and peace is central to most of my sermons, because the message of grace and peace is central to our Christian faith.

So it is Christmas morning. After the fevered pitch of Christmas Eve, with crowds of strangers gathered here in this room; after all the noise and chaos and rushing around; after all the effort to make welcome some six hundred people... it is nice to gather here, in the quiet of Christmas morning; to sing soft carols, and be touched by the gentle beauty of this day and its message.

There are differences between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, beyond how it feels to be in this room. One of the more significant differences has to do with the Scripture lessons that provide our focus. On Christmas Eve we read the Gospel according to St. Luke, filled with shepherds and busy inns and bustling crowds and barnyard animals. It is a compelling story. A moving story. A story that is packed with action and drama. Yet on Christmas Day, we find another glimpse of Christmas, provided to us by the Gospel according to St. John.

St. John doesn't start the story of Jesus at his baptism, as St. Mark does. And he doesn't start the story at his birth, as Matthew and Luke do. But he begins at the very beginning. In words that echo that very first chapter of the Bible, the poetic and powerful creation story from Genesis 1, John proclaims that before the earth existed – before time itself existed – the Word of God existed. That Word became the creating force of the universe, and all that exists came to be through the Word. And then, St. John tells us, in the fullness of time, the Word became flesh, and dwell among us. And we glimpsed its glory, full of grace and truth.

That is what the Word is of course. On one level, the Word is Jesus of Nazareth: the presence of God incarnate – in human form. But on another level, the Word of God is the truth about God. The Word of God is the proclamation that at the heart of God's plan for us is grace. And what is grace? Grace is God's desire to give us the gift of salvation. Not the expectation that we earn it or deserve it. But the desire to give it to us. Freely. Without merit. Given to us not because of who we are, but because of who God is. Because the truth about God is that God is a God of grace, who takes great delight in blessing us with far more than we could ever desire or deserve.

So when I begin my sermons by wishing you God's gift of grace, it is my hope that the Christmas story, played out on the stage of first century Bethlehem, will be played out in your life today. It is my hope that as God's Word became flesh in the newborn King, so too the power of God's grace will fill your hearts and your lives today.

So grace to you, this Christmas morning, and peace as well. When one has experienced the grace of God that is available to us in Christ, we find that we are at peace in our relationship with God. I enjoy reading about what is taking place in society, and have (as you might guess) a special interest in where people are finding religious meaning. These days it seems that so many people are not at peace with themselves, or

FIRST LESSON

ISAIAH 52:7-10

PSALM

PSALM 98

SECOND LESSON

HEBREWS 1:1-4 [5-12]

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 1:1-14

PRAYER OF THE DAY

ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU
WONDERFULLY CREATED AND
YET MORE WONDERFULLY
RESTORED THE DIGNITY OF
HUMAN NATURE. IN YOUR
MERCY, LET US SHARE THE
DIVINE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST
WHO CAME TO SHARE OUR
HUMANITY, AND WHO NOW
LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU
AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE
GOD, NOW AND FOREVER.
AMEN.

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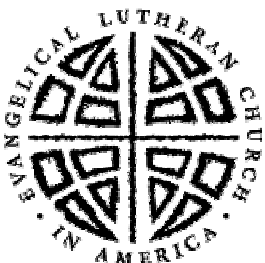
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with God. There is a nearly frantic search for meaning and purpose in our world. Some look to charity, others to entertainment, others to political identity or wealth or power... and it seems that nearly every off-the-wall religious system has more adherents than ever these days. The problem with seeking to form one's life around these ventures is that none of them ultimately puts you at peace. Each of them creates a system whereby people are never quite satisfied. The problem is simply this: each of us is created by God, and created to be in a living and growing relationship with God. That relationship is intended to be our central reality. Whenever we seek to replace that relationship with God, no matter what it is, it can't provide the sense of meaning and purpose and peace that we seek. Only when we are living and growing in God's grace can we know the peace of God that passes all understanding.

So grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In Christ, we find both grace and peace – given to us by a God who loves us dearly. Now at the same time, blessed by these gifts of grace and peace, God calls us to become instruments of grace and peace, sharing with the world around us what we have first received from God.

The late Mike Yaconelli told a story about a deacon in his church who, in his words, "wasn't deaking." He just didn't do what he was supposed to do as a deacon. One day Mike said to the deacon, "I have a group of young people who go to the old folk's home and put on a worship service once a month. Would you drive them to the old folk's home and at least do that?" The deacon agreed.

The first Sunday the deacon was at the old folk's home, he was in the back with his arms folded as the kids were doing their thing up front. All of a sudden, someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down, and here was this old man in a wheelchair. He took hold of the old man's hand and the old man held his hand all during the service. The next month that was repeated. The man in the wheelchair came and held the hand of the deacon. It happened the next month, and the next month, and the next month.

Then one Sunday the old man wasn't there. The deacon inquired and he was told, "Oh, he's down the hall, right hand side, third door. He's dying. He's unconscious, but if you want to go down and pray over his body that's all right."

The deacon went and there were tubes and wires hanging out all over the place. The deacon took the man's hand and prayed that God would receive the man, that God would bring this man from this life into the next and give him eternal blessings. As soon as he finished the prayer, the old man squeezed the deacon's hand and the deacon knew that he had been heard. He was so moved by this that tears began to run down his cheeks. He stumbled out of the room and as he did so he bumped into a woman. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He said that he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time." The deacon was amazed at this. He said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, my father would say that once a month Jesus came to this place. 'He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for a whole hour. I don't want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.'" ⁱ

We become God's instruments of grace and peace when we let Jesus take us into unfamiliar territory — a nursing home, a neighbor's home, a long conversation with a co-worker after hours... The point is that whenever and wherever we go, God works through us to extend these gifts of grace and peace – these gifts we receive here in this room, from the proclamation of the word and the sharing of the meal – God works through us to extend these gifts of grace and peace to those who need it most.

So grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May these gifts be yours this Christmas morning. And may they become the instruments by which you become God's blessing to this world. Merry Christmas, all. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 25, 2006)

ⁱ Campolo, Tony. "Becoming what God intended you to be," January 25, 2004, 30 Good Minutes Web Site, 30goodminutes.org.

English Text: ⁱⁱ

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ⁱⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

¹ Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. ² οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. ³ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. ὁ γέγονεν ⁴ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ⁵ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν. ⁶ Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης ⁷ οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. ⁸ οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. ⁹ Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. ¹⁰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. ¹¹ εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. ¹² ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, ¹³ οἱ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν. ¹⁴ Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. ^{iv}

ii A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

iii St. John 1:1-14, *New Revised Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

iv St. John 1:1-14, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).