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## Grace upon Grace

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church*

*Christmas Day, December 25, 2019*

*John 1:1-18*

Merry Christmas!

Wherever you come from, however many times you've been here or not been here, whether you know everyone in the room or no one, I'd like to invite everyone here to take a very deep breath. I don't know what situation you came from this morning. I don't know where you will go when you leave here today. But for right now, let's become very present to this moment in time. This precise collection of people, at this precise point in all of our individual lives, has never happened before and never will again. I think it's no accident that each of us is here, now.

We are here to celebrate Christmas, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth two thousand years ago. Yesterday we did that by hearing the story of his birth to Mary and Joseph in a barn, where only the shepherds, angels and animals knew anything about it. Yesterday's version of the story was gritty, pungent, and full of the ordinary details of life. But today, we heard a scripture about the origin of Jesus from the other end of the mystical spectrum. Today we have heard about Jesus as the divine Word of God through whom the world was made. The language mimics the story of creation in the Hebrew scriptures. In that story, in primordial chaos before time, God spoke, and God said, let there be light. And there was light.

So in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is the one who creates by speaking. Jesus is the speech of God by which the world was first made, and by which creation continues to unfold. Somehow what the scripture today is trying to convey, at the very edges of the reach of human imagination, is that in Jesus God was doing something so significant and totally new that it was comparable to the creation of the universe.

What is it about the birth of Jesus that evokes so powerful and mystical an association? Why should we understand Jesus this way?

I think we have a clue toward the end of today's gospel text, which says this: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." And, it says that "of his fullness we have all received grace upon grace." But here's the thing. In the original language, when it says that God the Son is close to God's heart, it actually doesn't use the word for heart. There is a perfectly good Greek word for heart, and it's *καρδία*. But the word that is used is *κόλπος*, which means bosom, or chest, or breast. So bear with me. The image we are seeing about the relationship between Jesus with God the Creator, is the intimacy of lying together, or nursing at God's breast. And that this is the one who makes God known. And that of Jesus' fullness we have all received grace upon grace upon grace.

Grace, precisely, is the intersection between love and mercy that shoes up in some unique, intimate, and tangible way in your life. It is a mother helping her child going back to sleep after a nightmare. It is Jesus providing an overwhelming amount of wine at a wedding in Cana after the hosts run out or an enormous catch of fish for disciples who have caught nothing all night or feeding five thousand hungry people with a few loaves and fish. It is Heidi

and Ivy bringing me potato chips and leaving them for me in random places because they know I love them. What this mystical scripture is saying is that it is the nature of God to show up in tangible ways to offer us grace, upon grace, upon grace, and that the purpose of Jesus is to make the grace of God known, and that if you and I were truly to understand and experience the grace of God, it would be as thunderous and life-giving as creation itself.

Grace is the ocean we are swimming in. Whatever it is that you are tempted to feel overwhelmed by, consider this. Just as you are constantly surrounded with the air you breathe, the warmth and light and life of the sun, so also, wherever you go, the Son of God, close to God's bosom, is seeking to provide you the intimacy of experiencing God's love and God's mercy, overwhelmingly, overflowing. This is the meaning of Christmas. Today's scripture is telling us that if you were to truly experience this love and mercy as a reservoir that never runs out, that you can never come to the end of, your life can be made new.

There was a Cistercian monk named Thomas Merton who said this about grace and about gratitude:

To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything that is given us - and God has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of God's love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from God. Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted... For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton. (n.d.). AZQuotes.com. Retrieved December 25, 2019, from AZQuotes.com Web site: <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/378255>

Yesterday I said that all of us come here with a story, a story about who we are and who God is for us, how we understand God. I began this morning by asking us all to become very present to what we are doing together, to this moment. Now I'd like to actually offer you a little silence, in the middle of one of the busiest seasons of the year, to imagine this. What if God brought you here today to invite you to recognize the grace upon grace that God is bringing to you, in tangible ways, so that you too can know God as the ocean you are swimming in and the love of God that is beyond all measure? Let me ask you a question, and then we'll hold silence for a minute or two. Where is God in your story?

There is a wonderful, tattooed, foul-mouthed Lutheran pastor named Nadia Bolz-Weber who has preached so much about grace and her own experience as a flawed and eccentric human being of the grace of God. Here is what she says:

Everything that *is not* rooted in grace that I have been offered in life - be it from social media or the wellness industry or higher education or religion feels like it's all about just trying harder. But I've *tried* trying harder and it doesn't make me free – it just makes me *tired*.<sup>2</sup>

May you be caught up into the current of the grace of God beyond any effort you ever have made or ever could make. May you receive tangible expressions of the grace of God in overflowing ways, today. May you be caught up into the current of God's intimacy and God's mercy so that you become an agent of God's mercy for others. May it make your life brand new, and make you a co-creator with God of healing and wholeness in this world. Merry Christmas.

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<sup>2</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Hail Mary, Full of Grace," in *Just Throwing it Out There: Grace for Fuck-ups* (December 23, 2019), accessed at <https://nadiabolzweber.substack.com> on December 25, 2019.