

## The Grace of Christmas

The year has come round again to Christmas. How good it is to be here with all of you! And how good it is to leave behind all the craziness of the last few weeks as we finally arrive at the true point of it all. Merry Christmas!

But has been crazy getting here, hasn't it? I'm daunted by it every year. I feel like the person they had in mind when they told that joke about Martha Stewart. You know, she goes out to do her annual good deed . . . on Dec. 23<sup>rd</sup> . . . She goes several stores, in order to be seen engaged in last-minute Christmas shopping, thus making people like me feel less inadequate . . . than we really are.

Thank God, we're now at the point of it all. Jesus Christ is born. In our hearts, and yes, even in our world, though God knows, it's hard to tell it from listening to the news from around the planet.

But it's not hard to tell when I look around this church, when I see your faces, when I see the beautiful poinsettias and wreaths, and the gleaming brass and silver on the altar, when I hear the glorious music and the thrilling words of the ancient story. Rejoice. God's own Son is born, Jesus, Savior, God with us. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." Yes.

Whatever emotions we may be registering or feeling, we are drawn here tonight by urges deeper than words can easily explain. Perhaps family togetherness draws you here--whether the family is your own household, or the church itself is the household of faith. Or curiosity about what a Christmas Eve service is like if church has not been part of your experience. Or maybe you are coming back to church after a time away, wanting to re-connect with something you've missed.

I want to suggest that behind all of our reasons for being here, is that this old, old, wonderful story suggests that an amazing grace is possible in this world we live in, and that, even more amazingly, such grace may be close at hand.

I like to say that the unofficial national anthem of the United States is the old hymn, "Amazing Grace." Everybody knows and loves "Amazing Grace," and that means, I believe, that just about everyone understands grace even if no one can really define it. When something unexpected and good has happened, and when it seems to

point to loving purpose and meaning in the universe, we sense that when grace has happened.

What the Christmas story shows us is that the universe we live in -- all the bad news notwithstanding -- is awash in grace.

Long before Jesus was born the prophets proclaimed God's grace. But human beings couldn't believe it until God in effect said, "Look, I'm going to become human just as you are, a baby and then a child and then a man whose body is subject to pain and death and grief just like yours, so that you can see that there's more to the story than just loneliness and fear and pain and death and taxes and sorrow. You are loved! Grace, God's grace, the grace of this holy night, holds you and walks with you.

The key to appreciating the reality of this holy, Christmas grace is to open your eyes to look for it, so that you will recognize it when you encounter it, or when it encounters you.

As he lay dying, W. B. Yeats, perhaps the greatest poet writing in English in the twentieth century, summed up his life's work: A human being "can embody truth but . . . cannot know it." Like truth, grace is lived, shared, encountered, experienced, not as an abstract, but as a lived reality.

Here's an example of grace as lived, experienced, embodied. Last fall, after one of our Sunday Evensongs, tea was served in the high Victorian manner, with silver teapots and china cups and saucers. And the luscious cakes and cookies and scones and jams were served on silver trays, all brought in by the choir moms. Well, after the cleanup and everything was sorted out, one of the silver trays was missing.

And it was a very special silver tray. It had been handed down to one of the girls in the choir from her great-grandmother. It was an old pattern, called Mayflower. And it was gone.

And then, about a month later, as mysteriously as it had disappeared, it turned up.

Well, great joy ensued, as you can imagine. But guess what? Mother and daughter wanted a way to express gratitude for all that St. Paul's is in their lives, and to acknowledge that the Mayflower tray, though treasured, was not as important as lots of truly important things, like healthy and family and friends. So as a statement of their gratitude

they decided to donate the Mayflower tray to the silent auction of our St. Nicholas Fair.

So you can imagine the surprise of mother and daughter when, the day after the Fair, the winning bidder arrived on their doorstep with a beautifully wrapped present, containing----the Mayflower tray.

That's grace, isn't it?

But the story doesn't end there. Mother and daughter have decided, and I share this story with permission, that they are going to put the Mayflower tray back in the silent auction next year! -- with the stipulation that whoever submits the winning bid keep it for a year as a reminder that "grace happens" -- and put it back in the fair for auction in the following year with the same stipulation.

That story--we'll have to call it our St. Paul's Mayflower story-- helps me understand what Christmas means. God's grace entered our world in a human body that first Christmas, and grace is embodied over and over in the lives of everyone who comes to follow the way of Christ.

The key to live embodying grace is to live with our eyes open. To live knowing that we are called to be, and given grace to be, bearers and sharers of the grace we have received. To become grace-makers. To live so that when grace happens to us, we respond with gratitude and generosity, lightening the darkness of the world around us, lifting the burdens of fear and isolation and grief and despair that weigh human life so heavily down, making grace.

That is the mission of this parish church, and the mission of every Christian.

Grace and gratitude in response to it do not make the world, or any of us, perfect. But living in the awareness of grace and making grace makes the world an appreciably better and certainly more blessed place to inhabit. And being grace-makers makes us fully alive.

Believing finally has little to do with thinking, and everything to do with living. Living is believing. To live grace is to know God.

May we together live the grace of Christmas in gratitude and generosity this holy night, and every night and day, now and forever.

Amen.