

Lesson: Ephesians 1:3-14
Gospel: Luke 1:29-45

Second Sunday of Christmas
January 3, 2022

“Embracing the Grace John 1:1-18 ”
Sermon by Pastor David Sivecz
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

The holiday season is over. The once lush green Christmas trees adorned with the sparkling colors of ornaments are now bare and dried out or put back in storage. Our ugly Christmas sweaters and wrapping paper are at the bottom of boxes. The radio stations have changed their music back, and we are left trying to forget the lyrics to “Here comes Santa Claus.” Parties were thrown, presents were exchanged, and gifts were returned. Winter has come to a full solstice, and now the daylight is growing longer. The holiday season is over, a calendar is turned over, and we begin a new year.

Although we are left in some debt, a little exhausted, and perhaps a tad overweight – not much has changed. The sky remains blue, the cacti stand tall, and it still gets hot in Phoenix. We continue with the everyday challenges of making ends meet and the mundane activities that are part of our daily grind. For the most part, when we walk outside of this building, the holiday season is a long distant memory.

However, while the rest of the world has “returned” to normal, the church continues in the Christmas season. Our sanctuary is still greened; we still have Christmas trees up, the lights are on, and we have baby Jesus in front of the altar. The time we spent in Advent has come to fruition, and we can rejoice in knowing a Savior has come into this world.

So, it doesn’t take much effort to realize that the church’s Christmas season and the rest of the world’s Christmas season are unaligned. I believe this is on purpose. I believe this is a reminder that Christmas is not simply a holiday that we celebrate once a year and put back into a box when we are finished. For us, Christmas is a season that becomes a springboard or becomes a catalyst to move us forward into the future. It becomes the foundation and the base for who we are and what we do. It sets the tone for being children of God.

This catalyst or prologue was what we read in our Gospel lesson this morning. John, the writer of the fourth Gospel, wrote his prologue to set the tone for the rest of the Gospel. For John, he set the tone for speaking about Jesus. John laid the background and foundation for who Jesus was and what Jesus would do. So, within these eighteen verses, John wrote a beautiful hymn that spoke about Jesus being the life and light to all people and how Jesus shines in the darkness.

In other words, this prologue was John’s take on Christ’s birth story. But, unlike what we heard on Christmas Eve, John didn’t say anything about Jesus being born in a manger, shepherds traveling, or a choir of heavenly angels singing. Instead, Jesus’ birth story, in the Gospel of John, was written from the beginning of all of creation.

By telling of Christ's birth through the beginning of creation, John wanted to reveal to us the nature of God. For John, God coming in the flesh of Jesus is how God reveals God's self or who is God – AND what's revealed to us is grace, or God's unconditional, unearned love. God's grace sets the tone for the remainder of John's Gospel. Grace found in Christ's coming is the Christmas story, it is the prologue or tone we hear in the Gospel of John.

Through this Christmas story, through Christ's coming, grace is what sets the tone for our stories. For us, when everything else tries to return to normal, we know our Christmas story does not end on December 25th. The Christmas story I'm referring to is not just the coming of our Savior into the world at a specific moment in history, but the grace that has entered our lives. It's why we don't celebrate Christmas from Thanksgiving to December 25th; instead, we observe Advent.

Each of our stories continues because of this Christmas story, of God's divine grace coming into the world through Jesus Christ. So, how has the Christmas story changed our stories? How are our stories being transformed by Christ coming? How do our stories reflect God's grace and truth in this world?

If you don't know how - then let me share a story of grace with you. A story that Elizabeth Ballard wrote. This story is about a boy named Teddy Stoddard. If you've heard this story before, I invite you to listen to it again. It begins with Mrs. Thompson, a fifth-grade teacher. She stood in front of the class on the very first day of school; she told the children a lie. Like most teachers, she looked at her students and said that she loved them all the same. But that was impossible because, there, in the front row, slumped in his seat, was a little boy named Teddy Stoddard.

Mrs. Thompson watched Teddy the year before and noticed that he didn't play well with the other children, that his clothes were messy, and he constantly needed a bath. And Teddy could be unpleasant. It got to the point where Mrs. Thompson would actually take delight in marking his papers with a broad red pen, making bold X's, and then putting a big "F" at the top of his papers.

At the school where Mrs. Thompson taught, she was required to study each child's past records, and she put Teddy's off until last. However, when she reviewed his file, she was in for a surprise. Teddy's first-grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh. He does his work neatly and has good manners... he is a joy to be around." His second-grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is an excellent student, well-liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother has a terminal illness and life at home must be a struggle."

His third-grade teacher wrote, "His mother's death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best, but his father doesn't show much interest, and his home life will soon affect him if some steps aren't taken." Teddy's fourth-grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is withdrawn and doesn't show much interest in school. He doesn't have many friends and sometimes sleeps in class."

By now, Mrs. Thompson realized the problem and was ashamed of herself. She felt even worse when her students brought her Christmas presents, wrapped in beautiful ribbons and bright paper, except for Teddy's. His present was clumsily wrapped in the heavy, brown paper that he got from a grocery bag. Mrs. Thompson took pains to open it in the middle of the other presents.

Some of the children started to laugh when she found a rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing and a bottle that was one-quarter full of perfume. But she stifled the children's laughter when she exclaimed how pretty the bracelet was. She put it on and dabbed some of the perfume on her wrist.

Teddy Stoddard stayed after school that day just long enough to say, "Mrs. Thompson, today you smelled just like my mom used to." After the children left, she cried for at least an hour. On that very day, she quit teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. Instead, she began to teach children.

Mrs. Thompson paid particular attention to Teddy. As she worked with him, his mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the faster he responded. By the end of the year, Teddy had become one of the brightest children in the class and, despite her lie that she would love all the children the same, Teddy became one of her pets. A year later, she found a note under her door from Teddy, telling her that she was still the best teacher he had ever had in his whole life.

Six years went by before she got another note from Teddy. He then wrote that he had finished high school, third in his class, and she was still the best teacher he ever had in his whole life. Four years later, she got another letter, saying that while things had been challenging at times, he stayed in school, had stuck with it, and would soon graduate from college with the highest of honors.

He assured Mrs. Thompson that she was still the best and favorite teacher he had ever had in his whole life. Then four more years passed, and yet another letter came. He explained that after he got his bachelor's degree, he decided to go a little further. The letter explained that she was still the best and favorite teacher he had ever had. But now, his name was a little longer. The letter was signed, Theodore F. Stoddard, MD.

The story doesn't end there. You see, there was yet another letter that spring. Teddy said he'd met a girl and was going to be married. He explained that his father had died a couple of years ago, and he was wondering if Mrs. Thompson might agree to sit in the place at the wedding that was usually reserved for the groom's mother.

Of course, Mrs. Thompson did. And guess what? She wore that bracelet, the one with several rhinestones missing. And she made sure she was wearing the perfume that Teddy remembered his mother wearing on their last Christmas together. They hugged each other, and Dr. Stoddard whispered in Mrs. Thompson's ear, "Thank you, Mrs. Thompson, for believing in me. Thank you so much for making me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference."

Mrs. Thompson, with tears in her eyes, whispered back. She said, "Teddy, you have it all wrong. You were the one who taught me that I could make a difference. I didn't know how to teach until I met you."

This is the power of God's grace given to us through the Word made flesh. Through Christ's coming, we see, experience, and know God's unconditional love and favor for us. It comes into the world not only to bring order but also to bring life. Because of God's grace, we are no longer bound to hurtful experiences, defined by our mistakes, or forced to live by fear.

Through the word becoming flesh and living among us, we see his glory full of grace and truth. From his fullness, from his being, from becoming human, we have all received grace upon grace. Grace is not a Christmas gift we can return to the store. It cannot be discarded or given back. We have received God's unconditional love and favor. Through Christ's birth, God committed God's self to coming in the flesh. Through Christ's birth, God committed God's self to Christ's death and resurrection. Through Christ's birth, God committed God's self to our redemption.

Christ came in the flesh not for us to simply see but to dwell within us. This is our purpose as the church and as individuals. It's the gift we, as Lutherans, emphasize. It's not our music, the way we pray, or our ancestry. Being Lutheran is about God's power of grace changing us, renewing us, and restoring us. This is Christmas. It is a savior bringing us grace and mercy.

This is why when the rest of the world "goes back to normal," we continue to celebrate the birth of our Savior. We are reminded that Christmas is not just a holiday in the church but is a reality that we live throughout the whole year. Christmas shows that we are more than just sinners. We embrace the grace. We are people whom God freely loves. And we are children of God whom God has, does, and will redeem us into everlasting life.

- Amen