

“Amazing Grace”

**Rev. Lucy M. Alexander
Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year C
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**Psalm 19:1-4, 7-10
Luke 4:14-21**

I wanted to talk to you today about grace. Partly because it's the season of Epiphany. But partly also because of an experience I had a few weeks ago. It's one you may have had as well. Have you ever found yourself thinking or saying something and you wonder, "where on earth did that come from?" As it happened to me, it was as if I was hearing myself at the same time as I was speaking. I found myself thinking, "oh, that's interesting. Why don't I just stop and listen and see what comes out next." And it was almost as if I was listening to someone else. This can be dangerous, of course. After all, who knows what might come out. We've all heard the expression, "open mouth, insert foot." But what I'm talking about is a bit different. The experience is like this. It's as if, while you're speaking, a part of yourself is speaking that you feel you couldn't have brought to consciousness by yourself. You have the sense that you need to give that part of yourself the space to express what it needs to. Because it might be saying something important that the other parts of you couldn't have laid their fingers on.

Maybe an example would help. A few weeks ago was our first class on the book "What's Theology?" We've been trying to have these classes on Sunday evenings and the first one went off as planned. But then last week, there was what felt like an out of the blue ice storm and a Patriots upset, so class was cancelled. And, depending on your perspective whether this is good or bad news, the Patriots will be playing again tonight. But, I'm getting off track. Let's go back to that first class. As an opening prayer, since it was the first Sunday of Epiphany, I reflected on the wise men following that star to Bethlehem. As I was speaking, a new sense of those wise men came to me. It hit me deep in my soul, just what an amazing thing it was that they would stake their entire lives on a star. It's nutty, really, when you think about it more realistically. Their lives, their whole sense of how they lived those lives, was well established. And here they were, trekking across those deserts, following what could turn out to be just an illusion of brightness. But they knew differently. They knew differently so deep within themselves that they devoted years of their lives journeying towards that star. My sense is that it was because God's grace had reached them in their faraway lands with those beams of light.

Jesus' words we heard today give flesh and blood to the same grace felt by those wise men:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
To bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The hymn we have just sung today, *Amazing Grace*, also gives flesh and blood to the experience of grace. It is one of the most universally loved in all of the Christian faith, giving cathedral-like proportions to the experience of grace. "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." It gives us a deep emotional response to the words Jesus preached in Nazareth.

A number of years ago, my family and I went to one of those corn mazes you sometimes find in the Fall. Maybe you have been to one. The corn has reached its full height and a path has been cut through it. It's almost like a labyrinth. We set out around 2pm one Sunday afternoon when my kids were little, thinking we'd just have a nice Sunday jaunt. And into the maze we went. Around and around we went. It was fun at first, but then Geoffrey and Emily started to get tired and I was getting pretty ready to go home. And it was also steadily getting darker. I knew that we hadn't been trapped in the maze and yet I could feel myself getting a little panicky. And my relief was strong when we realized that there was a tower in one corner of the maze with a person there to whom we could call to ask the way out.

"I once was lost and but now am found." What a deeply freeing experience that is. Grace is a wonderful thing. But my question for today is this. If grace is so wonderful, why can it also be so hard? Why did so many in Jesus' congregation that day respond with such animosity? Why did so many throughout Jesus' life respond with such animosity? Why are God's grace and Jesus' Cross so inextricably intertwined? Despite its gloriousness, why is it sometimes just as hard for us to receive this gift of grace as it was for the people of Nazareth?

I think one of the reasons is that we think about grace in limited ways. And some of these ways are ones we hear around us. Grace tends to be forced into an either/or box. Either you have it or you don't. Either you feel it or you don't. Either you feel it the way others feel it or you haven't quite got it. To put it bluntly, it's black or white thinking. And such thinking is not only limited, it can be dangerous. We can begin to feel inadequate as Christians if we don't feel we've had the proper dose of grace in our lives. We can begin to wonder, "what's wrong with me?" Or maybe we sense a feeling deep inside us we don't quite dare acknowledge. "Could it be possible that we just don't deserve such a gift?" Perhaps worst of all can come the question, "why doesn't God love me?" But such thinking doesn't take into account the very wonderful individuality of each of us. Think about Jesus' words: how specific they are. Grace means good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. Grace can be and is felt by us in radically different ways, depending on what our situation is. Grace for me is never the same as grace for you because grace is particular and specific.

But even if we move beyond what I call this limited thinking about grace, grace can still be difficult. Because it can make us feel powerless. How many of us have thought or felt, when facing a difficult situation, "gee, God, I could really use a little grace here." The sense is that it's all in God's control, and we are reduced to beggars. We are the poor, the blind, the oppressed and we hold out our cups, hoping that God will see fit to drop in a coin or two. But I ask you. What kind of a God is this? Is this the God who poured out his heart and his home for a son who had squandered his inheritance? Is this the God who dined well with sinners and saints alike, who held a

feast for thousands in an out of the way place? Is this the God who, on the night before death, shared a meal with beloved disciples?

We often can't touch or feel grace. And we know this. But this is another thing which makes grace hard. We may doubt its reality. Partly because we don't always trust our own perceptions. We may have an experience of grace but we call it something else. "Oh, that man just happened to be there at the right time." Or, "they've finally found a treatment that works." These things may be true, but that doesn't mean that God's grace didn't play a part. Again, it's not an either/or. While we can't touch or feel grace in and of itself, we can see the baby that was born in the manger. We can listen to the story of the wise men who followed the star. But even so, we can still find ourselves thinking and feeling that these events, or such events in our own lives, are really departures from the world as it really is. They're nice events. Even wonderful events. But they're not things we can count on.

In two different ways this morning, we have heard a different story. We have given children Bibles and have said that those Bibles are an important part of the foundation for their lives. We could be declaring something different to them. But this is what we are saying: that the grace revealed in the pages of that book will give them the very real building blocks of a full and human life. And we have heard Jesus' words as he begins his public ministry. He too could have declared something different. But this is what I hear him saying. "Grace is who I am. Grace is my flesh and blood and very being. Grace is my heart beat. And with my birth, God is showing that grace is how the world is made." Grace is at the core of creation. Grace is something we can count on. Grace is what we need to base our lives on, as hard as that can sometimes be.

It's not easy to give up everything and trek across a desert towards a star. And it is true that grace can seem as hard to grasp as those beams of light. Because it does come to us only in fragments. We can't know its full reality. But grace is not a limited or a once in a while occurrence. As we learn, like the wise men, to trust that grace, more and more, it will become the foundation of our lives. What difference might it make if we prayed each morning, "how might I live out of grace today?" And each evening: "how have I lived out of grace today?"