

Sermon January 3rd, 2021

Christ is a Reflection of God's Grace

During our Christmas season we hear the story of Jesus being born in a manger in the little town of Bethlehem. We hear the story of Jesus being dedicated in the Temple. When the first Sunday of Christmas lands on January 1st we hear the story about the naming ceremony of Jesus. On Epiphany we hear the story about the wisemen coming to Jesus from the far east, bearing gifts made for a king. Most of the stories we hear during the Christmas season are about Jesus in his infancy.

However, there is one story we hear on Christmas day morning, and then again on the second Sunday of Christmas, that takes place right before Jesus initiates his ministry. And that is a story in the gospel of John about John the Baptist's testimony of who Jesus is (**Image: Of John the Baptist**). Some may call this story John's Christmas story.

As we listened to John's words this morning, we heard that Jesus will make God's gracious love known to the people through his words and his deeds. Or in other words, Jesus will be a reflection of God's grace for the people who are longing to feel forgiven and welcomed by God.

For many who come to the river (**Image**) they have been rejected by the religious authorities. By their loved ones. They have carried this guilt inside them for way too long. For many their guilt has turned to shame. Sometimes this rejection, this shame was experienced by a person who said or did something that was hurtful to someone else. Often times this rejection, this shame, was experienced by a person who suffered from an ailment or a circumstance that was perceived as rooted in sin. Often times this rejection, this shame, was experienced by a person who had a lower status in society. Whether they were a woman, or a person living in poverty, or a person from a different ethnicity, or a person who was ill, or a person who had a disability (**Image**).

Whatever the reason for their experience of rejection and shame, John's words give them hopeful anticipation that the messiah will come soon. Offering them mercy and hospitality. Forgiving them and welcoming them into God's kingdom.

This is how John's words spoke to the people who were standing at the river waiting for Jesus to come.

As we hear John's testimony this morning, we hear this testimony as an affirmation of what Jesus has already said and did. Whether we reflect on the story where Jesus stands in front of the sinful woman, and challenges those who are ready to stone her to death. By saying, "the one without sin cast the first stone." Or, we reflect on Jesus having a theological conversation with a Samaritan Woman at a well. Or, we reflect on

Jesus healing the Canaanite woman's daughter, because he sees right through all those things that have contributed to the marginalization of this woman. In fact, he hasn't seen a person with such faith along his journey. Or, we reflect on Jesus inviting Matthew, a tax collector, to follow him. Or, we reflect on Jesus hanging out with all those who are perceived as sinners (**Image**). Offering them forgiveness. Inviting them into the kingdom life. Or, we reflect on Jesus preaching messages of hope for the poor. Feeding them when they are stranded on the shores of Galilee. Or, we reflect on the cross and resurrection scene where we see that God will go to any lengths to reconcile with us (**Image**). Showing us that God is indeed a merciful God who chooses to love us with grace, not wrath.

Throughout the gospels, we see examples where Jesus reflects God's gracious love to us though his words and deeds.

Throughout the letters of the Epistles, we see examples where the disciples reflect God's gracious love through the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus breathes on them on the day of Pentecost. Peter heals a beggar (**Image**). Philip listens to a Eunuch. Peter eats with Gentiles. Paul petitions to free someone from slavery.

As we reflect on our own faith journey, we see examples where God's gracious love has touched our lives. Moving us to reflect this gracious love to others. For example, you say or do something hurtful that you feel is unforgivable, and yet, by the grace of God, this someone who you hurt offers you forgiveness (**Image**). You feel so moved by this grace that when you find yourself in a similar scenario where you are the one who has been hurt. You feel more able to forgive, because you understand how transformative this gracious love can be to someone who receives it.

Or you experience rejection by someone or a community, because of your skin color, or your gender expression, or your sexuality, or your financial status, or your age, or your beliefs (**Image**). This person/community shames you for being this way. Calling you a sinner. Telling you, you can change. Telling you, you can just pick up your boot straps and get to work. Telling you to accept your lot in life, and fall into line.

Then you run into someone else/or another community who accepts you for who you are (**Image**). Welcoming you into their life. Lifting you up with words of grace and hospitality. Affirming your right to have the same opportunities as everyone else. From this interaction you feel more able to show grace and hospitality to others you meet who don't quite fit into your idea of who a good person should be.

All of us at one point or another have found ourselves in need of experiencing God's gracious love. All of us at one point or another have felt shame over something. We know how toxic shame is to our lives, and to our community.

God knows how toxic shame is for all of creation, and so, sends Jesus to us to show us that God is not one who shames us, but one who heals us from our shame. Who forgives us, and breathes new life into us.

We experience this grace and hospitality through Jesus' words and deeds, as we reflect on the Scriptures. As we retell these stories where Jesus loves us with a gracious heart.

We experience this grace and hospitality through the Holy Spirit's words and deeds, as, we the church, continue to live out Jesus' ministry in our world. Forgiving one another when we fall short. Welcoming and listening to those who have been rejected by society. Standing with them to bring justice to our world (**Image**). Lifting them up to new life.

As we get closer to saying goodbye to another Christmas season, we remember that the Christmas message, the Christmas Spirit is about who Jesus is, and what Jesus does for God's creation. And what we see from all our readings over the Christmas season is Jesus is a reflection of God's grace and hospitality, and that through this grace and hospitality, Jesus liberates us from our suffering.

May we carry with us this Christmas Spirit of forgiveness, hospitality, and salvation throughout the year.

Let us pray, gracious God, thank you for sending Jesus into our lives to show us your grace and hospitality. When we mess everything up, open our hearts to repent. Open the hearts of those we hurt to forgive. When we feel rejected and alone, help us hear your voice of hospitality. When others feel rejected and alone, encourage us to reach out and offer them hospitality. In Jesus name we pray, **Amen**.

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