

Grace upon Grace

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on January 3, 1993. Scripture Lesson: John 1:1-18.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

There are some experiences you can't understand unless you've gone through them. Years ago, I use to visit an elderly woman living in a nursing home who loved to read. Over the years she lost her eyesight and was no longer able to read. As a result she sank into a deep depression. I made the mistake, on one visit, of saying, "I know what you're going through." This women, ordinarily so pleasant, snapped bitterly, "You don't know what I'm going through! Don't tell me that you understand!"

Maybe you feel that way. "Nobody understands what I'm going through!" Maybe it's doubt, or grief, or loneliness, or anger or guilt. Maybe you just celebrated your first Christmas and New Years without a loved one. I know that I don't understand everything you're going through. I don't understand all that you'll go through in this new year. But God does! That's what Christmas tells us about God. God understands you. God understands me.

God understands us because God became a human being. Jesus was not simply *like* God. He wasn't simply the highest stage in human evolution. In the opening verses of John's Gospel we read something about Jesus which can't be said of any other human being:

"In the beginning was the word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.... He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory...."

In our opening hymn we sang of Jesus, "Word of the Father, now in Flesh appearing." Jesus is the Word of the Father, God's Word, God speaking to us. When the Old Testament prophets spoke to the people in the name of God, they'd say, "Hear the Word of the Lord."

In Old Testament times God's word came to God's people through prophets, like Moses and laws, like the Ten Commandments. But with Jesus, the Word was made flesh and lived among us to experience our needs, our troubles, and our despair.

Why do you believe that God loves you? Maybe you don't believe that because of what you've gone through, but if you do believe it, where did you ever get that idea? You certainly didn't get it by looking at the sun setting over the ocean or by looking up at the stars at night. Nature may point to a creator God, but nature can't tell us that God loves us. Nor do you get the idea that God loves us from just sitting down and *thinking about* the nature of God. Reason is a wonderful faculty. Where would we be as human beings without reason? But reason, all by itself, is incapable of telling us of a God who loves, cares, disciplines and understands. Nor do we arrive at the belief that God loves us through our personal experiences. Our own personal experiences can very well lead us to disbelieve that God loves us. Nor do we get this idea from the religions of humankind. Many, if not all, religions present a God who must be appeased by good works and religious rituals.

We get this idea that God love us from the Word of God made flesh in Jesus. We believe that God loves us because God's love became incarnate in Jesus. "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." In Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity, God's eternal Son, became flesh.

In the Gospels we read that God, in Christ, experienced hunger, loneliness, frustration, homelessness, ridicule, fear, any and all of the emotions and events that make our lives rocky and miserable. Jesus had to struggle against the sins of the flesh that we struggle against and he never gave **in** which he means he struggled with them far

more intensely than we who so often give in to the temptations. At the end of his life he became a prisoner. As a prisoner, he was abandoned by many of his followers, tortured, and finally executed. That final experience at the end of his life was so horrible that when he saw it coming he ~~asked his Father if he could~~ ^{prayed to} escape. And when he was dying he felt forsaken and abandoned even by his heavenly Father; God forsaken by God.

There's a short, one act play entitled *The Long Silence*. The curtain opens on the end of time before God's throne. It's the day of judgment, only it's not the the human race being judged. God is on trial. The witnesses come forward one by one; *millions of men, women, and children* and each bear witness against God because of what they ~~have~~ suffered and experienced. "What do you know about our suffering, our loneliness, our grief, our despair. You have no right to judge us. It's you who should be judged."

And then they pass judgment on God. They all agree that God should be sentenced to live here on earth. "Let God see what it's like!" they shout. "Let him be born a despised Jew", a victim of the holocaust cries. "Let him know what it's like to be called ~~illegitimate~~ ^{illegitimate} ~~bastard~~", screams a child of an unwed mother. "Let God experience what it's like to be a refugee", cries one of the Haitian boat people. "Let him experience hunger and thirst", murmurs a starving Somali. "Let him face false charges before a corrupt court system", shouts a Guatemalan Indian. "Let him be beaten and tortured", moans a victim of police brutality. "Let him die a terrible, shameful and painful death", wails a victim of AIDS. And when the people finish sentencing God, the play ends with a long, disturbing silence. No one utters another word. No one moves. Suddenly everybody realizes that God has already served his sentence in the person of Jesus Christ.

This is what we believe and proclaim about God. This is the faith I hope that each one

of us is willing to live and die for. Our belief isn't based on feelings or speculation. It's based on the testimony of men like John who lived with Jesus and beheld his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. John wants his readers to respond to his testimony. He's not writing to entertain us. He wants us to believe what he says. He wants us to receive Jesus into our hearts and lives. He wants Jesus to enable us to become sons and daughters of God; to enable us to do what we could never do on the power of our own unaided wills.

The Word became flesh. God became a human being in Jesus. God knows my pain and your pain. Of all the gifts you received this Christmas, none is more wonderful and needed than God's gift of Jesus. The gift of God's grace which he gives to us in Jesus Christ is a gift that keeps on giving, grace upon grace. Receive this gift of grace. It's not a feeling. It's not a religious experience. ^{when you receive commands...} Rather receive the Word of God as a Word addressed to you personally. God invites, calls and commands us to respond, to believe, to receive the Word of God, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, into our lives and hearts ^{to become a member of God's own family} so that our feelings, thoughts and actions ^{maybe} are changed; so that we might live, not according to our own will but according to the will of God. That's the only hope of salvation for this world as a whole and for ourselves as individuals.

"He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.... "

Amen

Let us pray: Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Alistair McGrath, Understanding the Trinity.

David H.C. Read, Sons of Anak: The Gospel and the Modern Giants.

Joel Nederhood, Our Flesh and Blood, Volume 29, December 1983, Number 12; "I know, he knows".