

Did You Miss Christmas?

Our New Testament reading is from John's prologue to his gospel, verses 14-18:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ 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.

This past Monday, we took our two visiting families downtown to see the Christmas tree and toy train we expected to be on display in the Capitol Rotunda. But we, with our three small grandchildren and numerous other families who had come with similar expectations, were disappointed to see workers cleaning up the last remaining branches of the dismantled and removed Christmas display. We were informed that the Governor's January 5th Inauguration Ceremony had necessitated the early removal of the Christmas display. Boo! Scott Walker, the Grinch who stole part of our Christmas!

Though we missed this Christmas display, we'd been able to celebrate Christmas at home with our families. But likely the majority in our community, and certainly in our world, had missed the celebration of the birth of Christ. Maybe someone here today missed Christmas. It's too late to see the displays of Christmas that have been dismantled and boxed till next year, but you can still know the meaning and joy of the birth of Christ as John sets it forth in his gospel introduction.

We celebrate the incarnation of Christ by seeing his glory. The word "glory" refers to God's appearance of light, beauty, awe, and splendor. The glory of God is his wealth, the summation of his attributes, his nature and his character. The eternal Word, Christ the Son of God, came to earth to show us the glory of God. Whatever the secular world experiences at Christmas, it's a far cry from the celebration of the shepherds at the birth of Christ. They saw the glory the "great company of the heavenly host" announced on Christmas night.

That night, the eternal Son became the God Man, taking on himself the very nature of a servant and was made in human likeness (Philippians 2:7). That God could become a human, retaining his full deity and assuming simultaneously our full humanity, is a miracle. Christmas is the celebration of the fact that eternal God the Son could, through Mary's impregnation by the Holy Spirit, become a zygote and then an embryo in the womb of the young virgin.

Both John's Greek and Jewish readers would have been stunned by his statement that a holy God could take upon himself human flesh. The Greeks couldn't imagine a holy deity inhabiting human flesh, which they considered inherently evil. And for a pious Jew to read that God who dwelt in his Shekinah glory in Moses' tabernacle would also dwell in the person of Jesus Christ was equally unthinkable. Also, the

fact that Jesus' humanity and deity were complete, that he could be 100% divine and also 100% human, is a mystery and miracle.

The Incarnation is a miracle of means but also of motive. It is a miracle of God's creative power that God *could* become a human. It's a miracle of God's redeeming love that He *would* become a human. And this descent of the Incarnation, the Word becoming a human, was to show us the nature and likeness and the glory of God.

We see the glory of the Incarnation through Christ's descent but also through the dwelling of Christ with us. When John describes how the Word made his dwelling among us, he's alluding to the tabernacle and the Holy of Holies that accompanied the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings and pilgrimage. In the Most Holy Place God's glorious presence was symbolized and inspired their worship and encouraged their obedience. John said the Word "tabernacled" with us (verse 14). The God of glory chose to humble himself to stay in "an uncomfortable tent" for us. Not only did Jesus take upon himself an uncomfortable life, but also one that would prove to be deadly in the worst sort of way.

Jesus, the incarnate Son, revealed the glory of God through miracles, such as the great catch of fish, that caused his disciples to fall before him in wonder and fear (Luke 5:1-11). The glory of the Incarnation is also a glory that draws us to God as a loving and gracious God, whose desire is to rescue and to bless us as his children. And the cross of Christ is the highest revelation of his glory, and in the cross we are drawn to our God of perfect love (John 12:27-33).

The glory of God is symbolized in the light of God—his beauty and brilliance that shines in and pierces the darkness. God's light overcomes the darkness, which is what Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah's birth in Isaiah 9:2. Darkness describes the world's ignorance about God before and apart from the coming and the presence of Jesus Christ. The truth about God came shining into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, who declared himself to be the Light of the World (John 8:12). Jesus Christ is the Truth about God and about us (John 14:6). No one has seen God completely apart from faith in Jesus Christ, the Incarnation (verse 18).

A little girl in Sunday school was busily and intently drawing and coloring a picture of a large face. "What are you drawing, Sweetie?" her teacher inquired. "God," she replied confidently. "Nobody has seen God, Honey, so we don't know what he looks like." "They will when I get through," she answered.

We know what God looks like now that Jesus has revealed him and "drawn" him for us. "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known," John writes (18).

Peter, James and John were permitted to behold the glory of Christ in his Transfiguration on the mountain (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36). Therein they were permitted to glimpse a degree of the glory he enjoyed and to which he would return in heaven. Even before the cross, the disciples recognized the glorious holiness and power of Jesus that made them aware of their sinfulness:

“When Simon Peter saw this (Jesus’ miracle of giving the disciples a great catch of fish), he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; for I am a sinful man!’” (Luke 5:8).

In Jesus’ outpoured life for us, his glory was revealed. It was the glory of his righteousness and perfect love. And, his cross was the greatest glory he revealed because in the cross we see his holiness and his amazing love. Christ on the cross is the picture of a God of perfect love, mercy, grace and forgiveness. This is the glory of John 3:16.

The Incarnation is glory that reveals the Son—just as light reveals the dirt on our clothes soiled in the dark. Jesus showed us a perfectly holy life, and we all appear soiled next to him. Yet we are geniuses in rationalizing our sin and denying responsibility for our actions, even to the point of blaming the devil, says the late James Boice, who told the story of a little girl named Mary Ann:

One day Mary Ann “got into a fight with her brother. The mother stopped the fighting by yanking Mary up sharply and sitting her down in a corner. She asked, ‘Mary Ann, why did you let the devil put it into your heart to pull your brother’s hair and kick his shins?’ Mary Ann thought a minute and then said, ‘Well, maybe the devil did put it into my head to pull brother’s hair, but kicking his shins was my own idea.’” Boice noted “That was tremendous theology, and it shows what’s wrong with the world. It is not what the devil, the environment, or our history makes us do what makes the world such a bad place, but what we do. The truth about the problem of (humankind) is that (we ourselves are) the problem.”

We celebrate the incarnation of Christ also by receiving his grace. We have received the fullness of his grace, and one blessing after another (16). It’s interesting that the word “grace” appears only here in the Gospel of John. Yet, the meaning and work of grace appear throughout the book “in narrative form” (Whitacre) as Jesus reveals himself and draws people to himself through his unconditional love, demonstrated supremely on the cross. Grace is defined as “God’s unfailing love” (*NLT*, verse 17), and covers all of God’s undeserved favor—what we desperately need but could never deserve. The Bible speaks of what we know of as God’s general grace, his goodness in behalf of all people, such as Jesus describes in Matthew 5:45. But the grace John refers to is grace that gives us eternal life. Grace is God’s work to enable us to see our greatest need.

There’s a crucial distinction between sight and insight. For example, the shepherds saw and heard the announcement of the angel and responded with faith and obedience and worship. The wise men said, “We have seen his star.” Apparently they saw in faith and with obedience. When the baby Jesus was taken by his parents to the temple for his dedication, the elderly saints Anna and Simeon responded to Jesus’ appearing with faith and worship.

Grace that saves gives us insight that breaks through spiritual darkness. The life story of slave trader turned pastor and hymn writer, John Newton, is one of seeking and saving grace. As James Boice wrote,

“In his very early years Newton had been raised in a Christian home in England; but his parents died when he was only six years old and he went to live with an unbelieving relative. There Christianity was mocked, and he was abused. Finally, to escape these conditions, Newton ran away to sea, joining the British navy. He fell into gross sin; it gained a hold on him. He eventually deserted the navy and went to...Africa...for only one purpose and that was to ‘sin his fill.’” There Newton once again was horribly abused and his life reduced to an animal existence.

After a time Newton fled from the compound and boarded a slave ship and got into trouble because of misconduct. After breaking into the ship’s rum supply, he became so drunk he fell overboard. He was saved from drowning when an officer rescued him by thrusting a harpoon into his thigh and hauling him back into the ship. “The harpoon made such a wound that years later Newton could still put his hand into the fist-sized opening.”

Near the end of the voyage from Africa to Scotland, a fierce storm threatened to sink the ship. After days of joining the slaves in pumping water out of the ship, Newton became terrified that the ship would sink. Bible verses about God’s love and the death of Christ which he had heard as a child came to mind, “and as he remembered them he was miraculously transformed. He was born again.” Newton went on to become a highly educated pastor, teacher and preacher, even preaching to the queen the message of God’s transforming grace (Boice, 110f).

We all know the familiar words of Newton’s world-famous hymn:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I’m found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Because of the incarnation of Christ we receive grace upon grace. As we see him as Savior and receive and submit to him as Lord, then we experience the new birth, which is the beginning of a life of “one blessing after another” (16, NIV). The grace by which we are rescued for life with God is with us for the long haul. The older I grow, the more I realize my total need of God’s grace, even when I don’t feel as spiritual or as grateful as I should.

The Apostle Paul said that in his time of extreme difficulty the Lord assured him with these words: “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Corinthians 12:9). The believer is called to participate in the narrative of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection. We must share in his sufferings in order to share in his glory, both now and especially in the life to come (Romans 8:17).

The incarnation of Christ assures us that when Christ came to rescue us, and took upon himself our humanity, God fully redeemed our fallen and sin-sick humanity and lifted it to heaven. Christ fully participated in our human condition. As Hebrews says, he was tempted in every way we are, yet he was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He experienced in his incarnation the full range of human weakness, suffering, and sickness. And in his death on the cross he carried our sins and sickness and broken-ness.

We have received grace after grace, but also grace that will lead us safely home. Whether you missed Christmas or not, you and I can together celebrate the fact that Christ came for us, died for us and rose again, and is willing to receive us into his everlasting family. That's something to celebrate now as we share the feast he has prepared for us, the sacrament of Holy Communion.