

“Grace Notes”

Date 24 June 2018
Text: 1 Peter 4: 7 - 11
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Well the next time you see me in worship will be July 21 as my vacation starts next weekend. We will spend part of the time travelling through the mountains. I am like peoples of all places, all times and different religions, down through the ages, for whom the grandeur and wonder of creation so often prompts spiritual reflection. As I enjoy the wilderness...being mindful of the sights, sounds and smells..my soul feels buoyed up. And I find my thoughts drifting to the majesty and marvel of God.

Has that ever happened to you? So it was on our visit to the Grand Canyon. If you've been there you know what I'm talking about because photos simply cannot do it justice. I don't think anything can prepare you for the immense size of that hole: at its deepest, 1.8 km. Viewing a world wonder like this can prompt our reflections on God, if we let ourselves. Marvelling in creation can also prompt our remembrance of our beliefs or snippets of scripture. Peering into the Grand Canyon reminded me of Psalm 139, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to Heaven, you are there. If I descend to the depths and make my bed in Sheol you are there". As we followed one very treacherous, narrow trail worn into the wall of the canyon I remembered psalm 66, "Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of God's praise be heard. The Lord has kept us among the living and has not let our feet slip". We sang psalm 121 which is an excellent example of this kind of reflection. "Unto the hills I lift up my eyes". For the psalmist mountains were pointers to God, reminding him where his help comes from.

As we walked along the Grand Canyon the inescapable thought among these reflections was the grandness of God's grace. Arizona is a VERY dry place, and Sheri and I imagined how bounteous the countryside would be if the Grand Canyon was filled to the brim with water, spreading life-giving water in every direction to bring vitality to the soil. This is what God does for the dry place that is humanity. God's life is about pouring out grace upon a world that would drink up every drop of it, whether people know where it comes from or not. As the old, familiar hymn says, "This is my Father's world, God shines in all that's fair". And so God does, if we have but the eyes to see it. Our spiritual reflections upon God can be imaginative like this, like imagining God's grace pouring over a dry and barren land bringing and renewing life in its path, for so God wishes to do with us.

One of scripture's images for grace is water. God's grace comes to us flowing like a river, and nothing will stop that flow. Three years ago we took in the power of Running Eagle Falls in Glacier National Park (USA). This waterfall (about 8 meters tall) pours out of a hole in solid rock. This water would not be constrained—even by a wall of rock!— and it found its way to create and widen a passage to pour out water onto the earth. So

it is with God's grace: nothing can stand in its way. Reflecting on God imaginatively, inspired by the awesomeness of creation.

The very last chapter of the Bible includes an imaginative image of God's grace, imagined like a river. In it we see God walking among creatures on a renewed Earth. And of this vision John writes, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city". Can anything impede the flow of God's grace that comes to us like a river of life? God is a vast reservoir of grace, and God wishes to let that grace flow through our lives, our families, our communities. What else can we say, but "thank you"!

The words grace and thanks cannot be untangled from each other. This is as it should be, for the apostle Paul reminds us of the bountiful nature of God's overflowing grace when he wrote that "the grace of God has appeared" (Titus 2.11), of "the One who called you in grace" (Gal. 1.6), of "the immeasurable riches of God's grace" (Eph. 2.7), that it is "in God's grace we stand" (Rom. 5.2). John in his Gospel says "from God's fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (1.16).

But I think our sense of gratitude is heightened by the surprising gifts of life, like when we stumble upon unexpected wonders. As Sheri and I explore nature we have been startled time and again by the unexpected. A grizzly bear on the side of a road. A snowy owl. A Richardson Ground Squirrel who work up too early this year. A very wet eagle. As a photographer these unexpected gifts make my day and foster joy! And so should God's unexpected gifts of grace for us: sensing God's peaceful presence in a time of trial, believing God has answered prayer, when a life situation resolves better than expected. Joy can be our only response, and along with joy gratitude for the one who is the source of grace. Jesus explained that living in God's grace can be like a man who was walking through a field and unexpectedly tripped over buried treasure! And the man's response in the psalm? Joy!

But we can also be attentive for God's grace. We can be like the pearl merchant in Jesus parable. The pearl merchant knows his trade and knows what he is looking for, and so is always observant of every pearl that passes through his hands. As it says in the parable, "on finding one pearl of great value, he went out and sold all he had in order to buy it." If we believe that God is pouring down on us grace upon grace, then shouldn't we be observant for it? It is like being in the mountains in the evening, anticipating sunset. We know that the colour will build and build unto its crescendo. And so we wait, and watch with anticipation of that expected moment. That moment is so fleeting, but worth the wait! If we wait upon the Lord, hopeful for just a glimpse of God's grace, what would that do for our soul?

As a photographer it is so rewarding to be there in the moment, to see something beautiful, and to capture its image in a photograph. But the wonderful thing about photography is that through the image I can share the meaning, the beauty, perhaps even a bit of the joy of that moment with others who didn't share my experience. It's the

same for us in the grace we receive. We are also called to share it. God's Kingdom is a Kingdom of grace, and that grace is shared by us living grace-filled lives. The flow of God's river of life flows in part through us, and from us, into those little corners of the world that you and I touch. As Peter wrote to the churches, we are to be stewards of God's grace. Grace is not just given to us, but entrusted to us for the benefit of others. How do we grow in that stewardship? By becoming ambassadors of grace: letting it flow from us just as it has flowed to us from God.

The Prayer of St. Francis asks God to help us be stewards of grace. Living this prayer turns us into those streams of life giving water. Where I see hatred, let me sow love. Where there has been injury, let me foster forgiveness. Where there is despair, help me bring hope. Then in the second half of the prayer it asks God to help us embody grace in how we live. To give priority to loving, rather than coveting love. To give priority to giving rather than getting. Let us pray this prayer today, but may this prayer become your life of grace.

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;*

*for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*