



“Time for Grace”

Third Sunday in Lent
5:30 p.m. Saturday, February 27, 2016
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

What is “grace”? I just said it, in my opening sentence. I say it just about every time I begin a message: “Grace to you and peace.”

Admittedly, it is the way Paul begins several of the letters in the New Testament: Galatians; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; 1 & 2 Thessalonians, and; Philemon (you probably knew that already). But what is “grace”? What do we mean, what do **I** mean, what does *Paul* mean, when we say “Grace to you and peace”?

My American Heritage Dictionary talks about: effortless movement; a pleasing characteristic; a *disposition to be generous or helpful*; even. Yet from a theological point of view, when we talk about grace, we’re talking about the undeserved love and forgiveness that Lord God through Christ Jesus gives to us all.

Undeserved, because we can never be good enough on our own to be as God wants us to be. We are always, somehow, some way, going to mess up, cause hurt to someone, unintentionally or not. We are always going to . . . sin.

When, as believers, we talk about grace, what we are mean is simply (and **not simple** at all), is that, no matter what, God loves us. God forgives us, no matter what. So “Grace to you and peace” becomes “Let’s talk about how amazingly God loves us and the peace that love brings”, which is kind of a long way to begin a sermon, so instead I say “Grace to you and peace.”

Another thing about grace? We don’t always see it.

Our two lessons tonight both give examples of grace that are not all that obvious. The quick back story from our Isaiah reading: Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians. The ruling class was taken away into exile. The military, while we don’t know for certain, was in all probability either killed or put into servitude. The temple, the palace, the walls: all of that was razed to the ground. The people’s hope for salvation was as broken as their city.

The people sat, in a foreign country, on foreign soil, next to a foreign river, and bemoaned their fate. There was a lot of self-pity: *Why did this happen to us? What did we do to deserve this? God has abandoned us!*

Thing is, if they would have stopped feeling sorry for themselves, and thought about their circumstance, really thought about it, they would have to face the cold, hard, reality about the

why and the what that brought them to that foreign soil.

They watched the northern kingdom of Israel fall to the Assyrians, and while they were saddened that their brethren fell, they weren't necessarily overly concerned about themselves. Because there in the southern kingdom, they had Jerusalem. They had the temple. And, as they felt was shown by the Assyrians themselves, the Lord God was not about to let *anything* happen to either Jerusalem or the temple.

The Assyrians had parked their troops right outside of Jerusalem for **months**; Jerusalem was in siege mode. But they survived. They got through it. King Hezekiah lead them, they were strong, and they persevered (well, actually, Hezekiah probably paid off the Assyrians, but they really didn't want to talk about that small fact).

What they did **not** do, was change **from** sinning against God, **to** following the Lord. If anything, once safe from Assyrian invasion, they *really* began to ignore Lord God. Yet the Lord continued to send prophets to them. The Lord **repeatedly** attempted to get them to return to the ways of service, sacrifice, and repentance.

But, nope, the people wouldn't have a whole lot to do with those. Ba'al worshipers, apparently, got better holidays, or gave better parties, and were more interesting, than the God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob. The people did *not* listen to the warnings of Jeremiah. They gave no heed to the admonishments of Isaiah. And so they found themselves, in a foreign country, on foreign soil, next to a foreign river.

But the Lord their God is a gracious God (**We** know this already, and it's why this is one of our readings tonight). God did not abandon them. Lord God was striving to teach them a lesson; help them comprehend that there are consequences to actions; that if you ignore someone (like your God) long enough, when it comes time that you *really* need help (like your country is about to be invaded by an overwhelming foreign power), that deity may not be all that willing to come to your aid, but may well allow you to be captured, transported, and exiled, all as a way of hoping you may well began to learn a lesson.

The good news, the very good news, for the descendants of Abraham, is that their lives were about to become full of . . . grace. The Lord their God was willing to bring them home, return them to the land of their fore-bearers.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. . . Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³ Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. (Isaiah 55:1, 2b, 3a)

Through Isaiah, the Lord is telling the people that the time to go home is soon upon them. And, hopefully, they have learned from this exile that life is so much more pleasant when they work with the Lord God, and not *against* the Lord God. Giving a second chance (or third, or fourth, or forty-fifth), is an example of grace in action.

In our reading from Luke, We have that kind of strange little farming tidbit about an unproductive fruit tree. (Well, actually, we have a couple of strange and nearly out of place stories about some folks who were killed. First, some people whom Pilate apparently had killed while they were doing their offerings, and a mention of some folks killed by a falling structure.

The point of those two stories, I think, is Jesus trying to say *Were those folk any worse sinners than any of you here? No, they weren't. But neither are any of **you** better than any of **them***). But that farming story is actually a story about . . . grace. Undeserved reprieve for that non-produce producing tree.

Let me dig around it for a year, the gardener pleads. Let me fertilize it, and water it, and tend to it. If it bears fruit, all the better. If not, then we'll cut it down.

That's another example of grace in action.

So what are examples of grace in action in your life? When has grace been shown to you, when you should have been held responsible for your actions? When have you received grace, when you know you were in the wrong? Or perhaps the better question is, When have you shown grace, when you have been wronged? When have you been an example of grace, when you know that correct morally you are correct, legally you are in the right? How easy is it to act with grace? How effortlessly can we proceed when we have law, morality, and righteous indignation on our side?

Grace is not easy. And, it's as simple as breathing. Grace is beyond our comprehension, and one of the aspects of our faith that we cling to most vehemently. Grace comes to us overflowing, and we never have enough. Grace.

It's time for grace.

Amen.

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