

Seeing Grace - The Rev. Richard M. Simpson
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2009
St. Francis Episcopal Church, Holden, MA

Tonight I want to take all of you with me on a journey to the island of Crete, a lovely spot in the Mediterranean just off the coast of Greece, where the forecast for today was for sunshine and a high of 67 degrees. But my invitation is not only to journey halfway around the world, but also back in time to the latter part of the first century. At that time, Crete had quite the reputation as a rough place. In fact, one of the locals said “Cretans are liars and evil beasts and lazy gluttons.” To which the writer of the Epistle of Titus simply adds, “well, yeah...”

Yet it is to this early Christian community in Crete that Titus is called to serve as bishop. That title is a bit misleading, because those roles weren't yet very clearly defined in the first century, and Titus isn't expecting a *cathedra* to sit on or a pointy hat for his head. But what he is called to do as an *episcopus* is to oversee the flock there—a flock taken from a bunch of liars and beasts and gluttons. The letter is written as advice from a friend to a friend on how to be a good bishop to a bunch of Cretans.¹

Good luck, because you have your work cut out for you! You are going to need to be tough on these people: their minds are easily corrupted and while they say they know God they really aren't living in a way that would make anybody notice. Their actions and their deeds deny the very God they profess to believe in. (See Titus 1:1-16)

That, in a nutshell, is the background for tonight's epistle reading. Ministry in a context like this isn't about nuance. The verses we heard tonight basically cut right to the chase and offer a pretty clear and concise summary of the gospel, and a mission statement for this bishop and the young church he is called to serve. While it may not be as familiar to us as Luke's telling of the Christmas story, in truth it has everything to do with our reason for gathering here tonight:

...the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Grace has appeared. It's an interesting way to put it, and more or less the same way that John's Gospel tells the Christmas story as well. Most of us tend to think of grace as an abstract concept or a doctrine to be affirmed or debated, but the claim being made here is that grace is experienced as a person: *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have beheld his glory, full of grace and truth.* When we see Jesus we *see* grace, and out of that encounter, Cretans of every time and place are invited to leave our old lying and gluttonous ways behind in order to become a people after God's own heart, a people called to live more self-controlled, upright, and godly lives; a people zealous for good deeds.

It's become rather popular for people to claim that they are “spiritual, but not religious.” As I hear it this is a claim made by those who wish to distance themselves from the institutional Church and

¹ The epistle claims to be from St. Paul to his dear friend Titus, but most scholars think it was written by somebody else claiming Pauline authority.

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Lord knows there are plenty of reasons people may wish to do that! For too many people, *religion* signifies something close-minded and bigoted and out-of-touch. It sounds politicized and dogmatic, suggesting that you are either “in” or “out.” *Spirituality*, on the other hand—well, only the most hardcore materialist-atheist is against spirituality. Spirituality grows out of the awareness that we are more than our physical bodies, even if we only get in touch with those feelings on a dark winter night or walking along the beach collecting shells on a lazy summer day. Spirituality suggests something that unites rather than divides Buddhist and Hindu and Muslim and Christian and Jew.

The Church needs to “own” the fact that we have contributed to the situation in which “religion” has become a dirty word. But our work is to reclaim this word, “religion”—not as an end in itself but as a call to discipleship. This work is not very different from what Titus was up to back in Crete two thousand years ago. *To behold grace is in some measure to be invited to become grace for others.* As our epistle reading puts it: “the appearance of grace, which brings salvation to all” not only redeems us but *trains* us, *forms* us, *uses* us to continue that work of healing and renewing the world around us. The birth we celebrate tonight is about forming a people after God’s own heart to share in this work of making things new again.

While the ultimate origins of the Latin word *religio* are a bit obscure, Joseph Campbell and others have made the case that the derivation comes from a word that means “to bind or connect;” or more precisely, “to reconnect.” The work that God gives us to do is about making connections: about reconnecting and binding things back together with their Source. In spite of the commercialization and trivialization and sentimentalization of Christmas, God keeps breaking into our world and into our lives and calling us to true religion *by giving us a mission and a vocation.* We who come to adore him on this night are changed by this encounter because in seeing grace, we glimpse what is yet possible for our own lives and families, for this parish church and for our neighborhoods, workplaces, nation, and even this earth, our fragile island home. That vision changes us, or at least is meant to change us. When we see grace, the work of Christmas begins as we begin to participate in this work of binding up a broken world.

The good news we remember and reorient our lives around on this holy night is that God has come into the world—*this* world as it is, this world of Cretans. God seeks us as we are, not waiting around for some sanitized version of what we hope we might become with our New Year’s resolutions. God has come into *this* world in all of its pain, and all of its glory, to overcome separation and estrangement and to repair all that has been rent asunder, to bind all things together again. God has come, and still comes, into the mess of our lives to eliminate the chasm that had emerged between God the Creator and God’s beloved creation. Sometimes the biggest estrangement we need to overcome is the internal one, the inward spiritual journey toward integration and wholeness. Until we are healed from within it may be impossible for us to become true agents of reconciliation. But ultimately we must move beyond ourselves and into the world, this world that God that God loved so much as to be born into it as one of us.

Do religious institutions need to be changed and redeemed and revitalized and reoriented around God’s mission? Always! But on this night above all other nights I am proud to call myself religious, because it suggests to me that Christmas is more than sentimentality or nostalgia for a distant past: it is a calling to share in building the Kingdom of God. We then need to develop spiritual practices and disciplines that build up the Body of Christ so that together we can do that work. Our spiritual

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practices grow out of this calling, for without mission, spirituality is doomed to become narcissistic navel gazing.

When you take the risk of joining the choir or ringing bells you find people who may love music as much as you do, but they have very different perspectives on what makes for good church music. And yet you covenant to live with them, to sing and ring with them, to be bound up with them for a while, with God's help. To enter into that is to not only encounter grace from time to time but even to see it with your own eyes and hear it with your own ears. *When in our music God is glorified, it is as though the whole creation sings "alleluia!"* The same holds true for the altar guild or the Mission Committee or the vestry or the youth group. I can guarantee you that you will find people in this parish church who will drive you absolutely crazy. (Trust me, I can name names!) They will see the world differently, vote differently, think differently, make different choices. And many at our dinner tables tonight and in the days ahead will mirror these same divisions and even polarizations that have become the norm in our own day. If you are an MSNBC Rachel Madow junkie, then it is somehow by the strange providence and grace of God that you find yourself seated next to someone whose favorite source for news is Glen Beck.

But here is what I am trying to say to you tonight as we celebrate this Feast of the Incarnation: we don't become more "spiritual" by avoiding all of that. We don't become more spiritual by turning away from all of that. We discover a more authentic Christian spirituality when we become religious enough to embrace it all, for the love of God in Jesus. These others have been given to us as companions along the way, called by God to the same Table to be fed with the same bread and wine. Together we are called to become what we receive—the Body of this child born in Bethlehem, this child who grows in stature and wisdom, this child who will one day make the long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and be crucified. It turns out, however, that isn't the end of the story but a new beginning.

I am not suggesting that we find the truth by debating it until someone cries, or that the truth is found in some mushy middle. I am simply trying to say that we are given the chance to love one another as God has loved us and that as that great mystery unfolds we really do find ourselves in a place where we can *see* grace and truth and that where we see grace and truth we see this child, Jesus.

The work of this night—the carols and candles and Scripture and preaching, the bread and the wine and all the rest—ultimately cannot transport us back in time to Bethlehem or to Crete. Rather, we pray for something much closer at hand—that all of these outward and visible signs create a space—here and now—a place where, with God's help, our eyes do see and our ears do hear.

Unto us is born on *this* day a Savior. The Holy One is in our midst—in the flesh, full of grace and truth. May we—like the shepherds and wise men and wise women of long ago who first came to adore him, and like those early Christians in Crete—not only come to adore him but also respond by offering ourselves, our souls and bodies, to do the work that we have been given to do in His name. That, I think, is how we not only discover the true meaning of Christmas for ourselves, but share that good news with our neighbors.