

Greater Grace

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Lk 2:11). Dear people of God and recipients of this good news of great joy, the Scripture text for our consideration this Christmas morning is the closing verses of our Gospel for today, John 1, especially vs. 14-18, which I’ll read once again.

So, have you received all your gifts? Have you given all your gifts? Have you even wrapped all your gifts, or do you still have to do that when you get home? Gift-giving, gift-getting is such a part of Christmas that it’s hard to imagine Christmas without it. We make lists of gifts we want to be given, lists of gifts we need to buy; we go into debt buying all these gifts; we keep Amazon drivers and post office mail carriers busy at our front door. And it’s all because in our culture Christmas and gift-giving go hand in hand. But, dear Christians, never forget that this generous but often stressful Christmas tradition of gift-giving is always meant to remind us of the greatest gift God has given to us: the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. For all of our stressing over gift-giving and gift-getting, the true meaning of Christmas is that God is the ultimate gift-giver, Jesus is the perfect gift, and we are the recipients of God’s gift of grace.

That word grace is a very important word in this sermon text; it comes up four times in these verses. And any Lutheran Catechism student, yourselves included, I’m sure, could offer this simple definition for grace: grace is God’s undeserved love. God shows us his love in a multitude of ways not because of our godly behavior or good works (we certainly deserve nothing good from God) but simply out of love for us. Grace is God’s undeserved love.

And in the Bible, the word for grace comes from the same root as the word for gift. Grace and gift: the two words are almost interchangeable. A gift is grace; grace is a gift; they mean the same thing. So on this Christmas morning, when all the world is exchanging gifts and most people don’t even understanding why they’re doing it, we as believers in the newborn Savior are celebrating this gift, this grace: vs. 14. And, vs. 16.

But what does that mean – grace in place of grace? It means that the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was not the first time God showed grace to his people. With that somewhat cryptic phrase, “**grace in place of grace,**” the Apostle John is teaching us that there are two phases, if you will, of God’s grace. Grace Phase One is pre-Jesus grace, OT grace. Grace Phase Two is Jesus-grace, NT grace, Christmas grace, what today we will call greater grace.

Listen again: vs. 16. And the next verse gives the explanation: vs. 17a (that’s Grace Phase One); vs. 17b (that’s Grace Phase Two, the greater grace). As Lutherans we may at first be a little uncomfortable equating the law of Moses with grace, because we think in terms of law and gospel. The gospel is grace, not the law. The law condemns; the gospel saves; we all know that. However, the law of Moses, the Torah, was not just rules and regulations and commandments. What God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai, and what God has recorded in the OT, also includes beautiful Gospel promises, amazing grace, the Lord’s covenant commitment to his people, the sacred symbols foreshadowing the coming of the Messiah. All of this is Grace Phase One.

And there are tons of examples: (all grace)

1. Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, fall into sin, God’s promises a Savior to crush serpent’s head
2. Exodus, God delivers children/Israel slavery/Egypt; foreshadows Jesus delivering us, slavery to sin/death
3. Promised Land of Canaan, just like Promised Land of heaven
4. In wilderness, bronze serpent raised on pole to save everyone who looked, from snakes; like Jesus
5. Tabernacle, later temple – rooms (HP, MHP); furnishings (ark, altar, candlestick, curtain) – that sacred structure where God and humans met – Jesus himself would say: he’s fulfillment
6. All sacrifices/bloodshed to take away sin; all pointed to Jesus, Lamb/God, who shed blood/cross, our sin
7. All Jewish festivals & sacred days, outlined in law of Moses: Sabbath (rest); Passover (deliverance); Day of Atonement (Good Friday)

All of these examples from the law of Moses, from the OT, are all gifts of God's grace, Grace Phase One. And they all pointed ahead to, and someday would be replaced by, a greater grace, Grace Phase Two. **Vs. 16-17.**

Today, we, like Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, are gathered around the manger to gaze in wonder upon the Word made flesh, the incarnate God, the creator of the universe wrapped in swaddling clothes, who left his home in heaven and came to earth to make his dwelling among us, who humbled himself by taking the very nature of a servant, a frail, flesh and blood human baby. And God gave us this baby Savior as a gift, as grace greater than the grace of the OT. That grace was grace promised; Jesus grace is grace fulfilled. Jesus is the greater grace, and this grace is looking you in the eyes, squeezing your finger with his tiny fingers, and smiling at you with his adorable infant face. This is the grace you can hold in your arms and sing a lullaby to. This grace is finally here, in the manger, in Christ Jesus. And this grace is greater grace, because it replaces and fulfills the former grace. **Vs. 16.**

Let me use an analogy. Let's say for Christmas this year someone got you a gift card or a gift certificate. It could be as simple as a gas card to Kwik Trip, or as elaborate as an all-expense-paid overnight excursion to some resort or special venue. When you open that gift certificate, you are filled with gratitude because you are holding in your hands a promise of something wonderful to come, in the future. That gift is grace. But it's not until you actually fill up your tank with gas, it's not until you actually visit the venue and stay overnight at the resort, that you truly experience the gift and receive what the giver intended you to have. In a similar way, the grace of God is like a gift certificate, first given, then fulfilled. In the OT, God makes gorgeous promises, in word and in symbol. But those promises are only truly fulfilled and experienced when the Savior finally arrives. My dear Christian sisters and brothers, the baby in the manger is that Savior; he is the gift our heavenly giver wants us to have – which is why Jesus' birth (and life and death and resurrection) is greater grace. Jesus is God's promise fulfilled. Jesus replaces the old promises and symbols, just like the gas in the tank replaces the gas card, just like the stay at the resort replaces the gift certificate. Both are grace. But the fulfillment is the greater grace.

And so on Christmas morning, we rejoice that **vs. 16.** Never forget that. It's so easy to forget that, when life gets really hard, when people hurt us and disappoint us, when sadness darkens our Christmas because a loved one isn't there to celebrate with us anymore, and when the challenges of life and health steal away our attention from the baby in the manger. We so easily forget about God's grace, his gift, just like perhaps you've already forgotten what you got for Christmas last year, or in a year from now you'll forget what you got for Christmas this year. The only cure for such sinful forgetfulness is to park yourself next to that manger, not just on the 25th of December, but all year long. Stay in the stable. Sit down beside swaddled baby Savior in the manger, because he is God's gift of grace to you. About him John the Baptist says: **"He who comes after me"** (John was the forerunner, preparing the way) **"has surpassed me"** (for as great as John the Baptist was, Jesus is infinitely greater) **"because he was before me."** From all eternity, or **"In the beginning,"** was the Word. And about him John the Apostle says, **"We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son."** When Jesus comes the second time on the Last Day, he will come **"with power and great glory"** (Lk 21:27), with angels, on the clouds of heaven. But when he comes the first time, as a baby born in Bethlehem, that coming is glorious, too! Today we celebrate the glory of the manger. And even though **"No one has ever seen God,"** because of Jesus someday we will. The glory of the manger leads to the cross, and the cross leads to the empty tomb, and the empty tomb means eternal life. And it's all God's gift to us, his greater grace.

Vs. 16. God has been showing grace to his people since day one. But we have the greater grace; we have the fulfillment of the promises. He's wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger, and he is God's gift of grace to you and to me, now and forever. Happy Christmas!

John 1:14-18

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.