

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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**Grace Upon Grace – Better Than Merry Christmas**

**John 1.1-18**

**December 20, 2009**

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I've never really liked poetry. I usually don't understand it – I think that's why I don't like it. The words sound good. I feel like I'm supposed to like it. But I get to the end of a poem and my reaction is usually the same: Huh?!?!?! It sounds like something I ought to really like, but I don't. I'll admit the – Huh?!?!?! – is kind of my gut reaction to the beginning of John's Gospel. It sounds good, but what does it really mean? So here we sit, the Sunday before Christmas, we've already had the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths; we've already had the shepherds keeping watch in the field; we've already had the angel saying "Fear not!"; we've already had the magi following the star. And today we get . . . poetry. Great! And I'm preaching. Shouldn't we have saved Luke's version for today? It's the one we all know the best and love the most. Isn't that really the story we had hoped to hear on this Sunday before Christmas?

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

Huh?!?!?! What kind of birth narrative is that? In order to feel like we are celebrating Christmas, don't we need a crying baby with all the trappings of a Silent Night? No. We don't. We need something more than that. Have you heard? The whole Jesus event is more than a one time birth over 2000 years ago. I think John is trying to give voice to something bigger – something greater – something of cosmic proportions. We cannot be satisfied to let the story remain in a stable. John is pushing us to catch a vision of what God is up to – and what God is up to is much more than a simple "Merry Christmas, ya'll." What God has in mind is far better than a once a year well-wishing. What God is plotting has a bigger impact and deeper meaning than a greeting or a

salutation of “Merry Christmas.” I believe it is John who finally captures this whole Christmas thing. What, at first read, leaves me with a resounding Huh?!?!?! leads me to a real Aha!!! Perhaps John’s Gospel is the best birth narrative of all.

John opens his Gospel with words that take us all the way back to Genesis 1.1 – *in the beginning* – it’s always a very fine place to start. Starting his Gospel with the birth narrative wouldn’t be enough. He was going back farther. John is intent on making a connection that is beyond time as we count time. And John pulls together a hymn of sorts to describe what we all know to be, honestly, indescribable. But John attempts to give words to that which is beyond words. Perhaps that is the great irony, then, that John uses the word – Word. The Greek *logos* (Word) appeared “in a variety of religions and philosophies with which the writer of John may have been familiar . . . In the use of *logos*, then, John has chosen a term familiar to both Jews and Greeks, but has used it in a new context with fresh meanings. John draws on the rich symbolism associated with *logos* and uses it as the lens through which he views the coming of Jesus into the world . . . John 1.1 stresses the eternal existence of the Word with God, an existence outside the bounds of time and history.” (New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX, Gail R. O’Day, page 519)

And so we gather here today to celebrate the birth of an infant named Jesus – who is described in John’s way as the *Word made flesh*. So let’s get this straight – “the Word is an infant and cannot, need not, speak.” (The Christian Century, December 17, 1997, John Stendahl, page 1187) The Word is not spoken, it is lived. So as you head into Christmas this week – are you simply speaking “Merry Christmas” to passerby – offering well-wishes to a frenzied people who mostly are more looking forward to December 26 than they are to any real celebration of the birth of the *Word made flesh, who lived among us – full of grace and truth*. Are these merely words that we speak to one another in the same way we say, “Hey, how are you?” fully hoping

and wanting and needing for the reply to be, “Fine, how you?” because we can’t handle anything much deeper than that. “Merry Christmas” is much too benign, much too safe, much too shallow.

Here’s my suggestion for a holiday greeting – it’s taken straight out of John’s “birth narrative” – *Grace upon Grace*. Yes, I know, we’ll get some strange looks if our conversations go like this: the friend that you’ve just bumped into by chance in the supermarket line starts the inane chatter, “Hey, long time, no see. How are you doing? (Fine, how you?) Can you believe this weather – and we got no snow out of it!” After a full debriefing about the kids and how busy each of you is, she signs off with the obligatory, “Merry Christmas!” And you say, “*Grace upon Grace*.” She’s going to be taken aback, caught off guard, halted in the swiping of her credit card. *Grace upon Grace*? What in the world does that have to do with Christmas and sweet little baby Jesus? John tells us today what Christmas is all about. And isn’t that really what the world needs more than a Merry Christmas? John’s Gospel says *from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace*. He goes on to say that Moses brought the law and Jesus brought grace and truth and while no one has ever seen God – Jesus will be the very resemblance to make God known to us. And of all the characteristics for John to call our attention to – it is one: *Grace upon Grace*. This should tell us something about what we need to receive and what we need to offer this Christmas.

It is really instructive that two of the four Gospels have no need to give us the details of the literal birth of Jesus. We have a need to hear it - maybe just because we love a good birth story. I’ll never forget what the nurse said of my 9 lb 5 oz baby boy who was born at 1:00 pm on Thanksgiving Day 13 years ago: “It’s a toddler.” He was so big. I’ll never forget how my father couldn’t believe that Russ was going to be in the delivery room – “that was no place for men,” he said – and yet he almost didn’t get out of my room before Bennett was born and I’ll always

believe that he really wanted to be in there, but after all he had said about it, he knew the hypocrisy would be too much. I'll never forget how Russ brought French toast and bacon into my room as I was in labor just before Bennett was born because he knew that if he didn't eat then, it would be lunch before he would get a chance to eat. I'll never forget that my sister and mother were there – wrapped in coats and blankets all night long because I demanded that the room be kept cool as my body served as an incubator for new life and I was roasting. I'll never forget Russ counting to 10 over and over and over again as I literally labored to bring a new life into the world. I'll never forget a 2 year old Jackson seeing his baby brother for the first time. I'll never forget the overwhelming feeling of love when my hands first touched both of them. We love the birth stories, but none of these birthing details will determine who my sons will become. What they become will be measured in how they treat others and how they serve others and how they exhibit Love. Who they are becoming is a more important story than the story of the day they were born.

And so John's poetic birth narrative is really a story for the world. He's not concerned with the details. His focus is on how this Word of God in the person of Jesus the Christ becomes for us – *Grace upon Grace*. How do you wish a Merry Christmas to people living in a war-torn country? What they need is *Grace upon Grace*. How do you wish a Merry Christmas to someone whose grief is so raw? What they need is *Grace upon Grace*. How do you wish a Merry Christmas to soldiers who carry guns and use them? What they need is *Grace upon Grace*. How do you wish a Merry Christmas to people without homes or healthcare? What they need is *Grace upon Grace*. How do you wish someone a Merry Christmas when they are in the midst of the joyous chaos of twin babies? What they need is *Grace upon Grace*. How do you wish a Merry Christmas to someone whose heart is broken? What they need is *Grace upon Grace*. How do you

wish a Merry Christmas to people who are so wounded by distrust and misbehavior? What they need is *Grace upon Grace*. What could happen to our Christmas if we offered the fullness of Jesus which is this very *Grace upon Grace* of which John speaks. All of these examples are right here among us – not ripped from the headlines – but ripped from the pew that perhaps you sit upon right now. Let us not offer the simple and somewhat trite – How you? Fine, how you? Merry Christmas! – anymore. Let us go deeper and see not only the baby Jesus this week – wrapped in swaddling clothes – but let us cling to John’s telling of the birth of this One that is truly timeless – the One who was, is, and ever shall be our *Savior, which is Christ the Lord . . . full of grace and truth . . .* embodying *Grace upon Grace*. (a compilation of Luke and John)

We’ve been asking the question throughout Advent: Have you heard? Well, have you? Have you heard people needing grace – clamoring for grace? Have you heard yourself offering grace? Have you listened to all the ways you need it for yourself? This week we will gather with family around decorated trees, we will sit around dining room tables for great feasts, and we gather in worship – in all of these places and in all of these ways what we are doing is gathering to celebrate this one who, in his fullness, reveals “the freely given, unmerited favor and love of God.” (dictionary.com theological definition of “Grace”)

I do not wish you Merry Christmas. *I wish you Grace upon Grace*. It is the best gift of all. May it be so.