

Sermon-12/24/08 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“The Incarnation of Grace”  
Titus 2:11-14

The sermon text for Christmas Eve is from the letter to Titus. That might surprise some of you. My guess would be that most people couldn't begin to find Titus unless they used the table of contents in the front of their Bibles.

Normally the text for this sacred evening is that familiar text in Luke, chapter two. That passage is so beloved and beautiful it almost preaches itself. We don't need any commentary on it, let alone a sermon. A preacher can only take away from the meaning of that passage no matter how eloquent the sermon.

So, we are going to stick with Titus this year. This little book in the New Testament lays out how we should live because of that first Christmas. As one commentator has said, “We have not gathered this day merely to ‘celebrate.’ We have gathered to ponder the implications of the invasion of God among us.” That commentator has it right. The incarnation is truly God's invasion among us. We just have to figure out what that means.

Titus is also a good passage to ponder this night because it is all about living in the time between that first Christmas, the first coming of the Christ into our world, and the culmination of history, or what some call the second coming of Christ. That is exactly where we live. We live between those two decisive moments.

One commentator says living between decisive moments is something we understand. We do it all the time. She talks about living between becoming pregnant and the eventual birth of the baby as one such time between two decisive moments. She goes on to mention several others: living between the engagement and the wedding, between being accepted at a college and graduation; between the diagnosis of a terminal illness and the death that follows.

Much of life is lived in the times between decisive events. It is the yes, but not yet experience so common to life and faith. Yes, we have been saved by God in Christ, but we have yet to experience the full reality of our being saved. Yes God has reached out to us and brought salvation, but sometimes it just doesn't feel like it.

Titus says the word we need to hear loud and clear, the word that captures Christmas, the word we need to cling to as we wait for history's culmination is grace. He writes, “For the grace of God has appeared. . .” The Greek word here is epiphany. The grace of God has epiphanied. It has been made evident. Jesus, for Titus, is the epiphany of God's grace.

This grace heals us. That is part of what the word “salvation” refers to. To be saved is to be healed. It is to be made whole. It is to be rescued. Grace, according to Titus, also

trains us. It molds us into the people God wants us to be. One commentator sums it up by saying grace liberates us but also shapes our character.

Because God came to us in Jesus that first Christmas we can recognize God's grace among us, incarnated in the flesh of our lives, working to shape us. What a wonderful thing to be shaped by grace. When we let Christmas into the inner chambers of our hearts, we become more graceful.

More specifically, Titus says we are trained to show self control, to be upright, and to be godly. These three things sum up our responsibilities in the relationships of our lives. Self control is about the training that goes on in our inner lives, in our relationship with ourselves. Being upright, or just is about the training grace gives us in our interpersonal relationships. Being godly is all about how grace trains us in our relationship with God.

I like the way the Jerusalem Bible translates part of verse twelve. It reads, "what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God." That is a nice way to put it. It is also a pretty tough standard to live into. If any part of your life leads away from God, give it up. That is part of the implications of celebrating Christmas.

For Titus, because God's grace has appeared in Jesus, our lives should be about being taught the disciplines that lead to God. Some of the disciplines mentioned in Titus sound pretty dated. What might the disciplines we need to be taught by grace look like today?

Looking at our broken world on the edge of 2009, in the midst of wars and recession, greed and cosmic grumpiness, we could all learn to be taught some important disciplines by grace: generosity instead of greed; compassion instead of self-centeredness; peace instead of power grabbing; patience instead of instant gratification.

As one scholar noted, Titus wants us to learn the disciplines that lead to healthy communities. Because God's grace was incarnated that first Christmas, we can hope for better communities if we allow ourselves to be shaped by that grace.

There is wonder and child-like joy this evening captured by that sacred story in Luke two. But there are implications when God invades our lives with grace. Christmas is more than celebrating warm moments. Christmas is all about letting grace get under our skins so it can shape us into a people fit for God's community.

As we take communion this evening, let us give ourselves to God's liberating and shaping grace. Merry Christmas. Amen