



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, YEAR B, DECEMBER 27, 2020  
ISAIAH 61:10-62:3; PSALM 147:13-21; JOHN 1:1-18

## NEXT STOP: GRACE UPON GRACE

*John 1:1-18 [In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.]*

There's an online video you may have seen, of a woman, longing to travel, walking on her home treadmill with a wheeled suitcase rolling behind her. She's got her sun hat, comfortable trekking clothes on and an inflatable travel pillow around her neck. Many are longing to

travel again soon, but what compels us to travel anyway?

My most formative travel memory is from my senior year of college. I had the opportunity to participate in a study abroad program and live with a family in Cuenca, Ecuador. I arrived at the home of

the family around midnight and went to bed without seeing the town or my home for the next semester in the light of day. In the morning, I awoke and before even opening my eyes, I knew I was in a different place. Everything sounded different to my Pacific Northwest ears: the birds and wind in the trees, the neighborhood dogs, the sound of cooking and voices downstairs. In that moment, I was filled with the joy of the adventure ahead and also daunted by the prospect of getting through my first day with my very poor Spanish.

When we travel, our minds and souls feel more expansive. We're hard wired with a need for transformation, and travel has a way of bringing hope that we'll come away changed.

As of today, travel remains limited. Just this week, even the Washington State ferries, understandably, asked that travel be curtailed to essential Puget Sound crossings only. So, especially at Christmas, I for one feel grounded. But in the gospel today, there is a different kind of journey described for us, one filled with unimaginable adventure and wonder.

We hear of two travelers, John, sent to witness, and Jesus, the true light coming into the world. The annotated notes of my bible describe the plot of Jesus' story in John Chapter 1 as: "Jesus begins with God in heaven, sojourns on earth and returns there."

But there's another traveler mentioned too... and that's us: invited to grace. Not just one stop at grace, but two: grace upon grace. "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." Why are there two stops? And why would we go?

Grace is a big word in a little one-syllable sound. There are many definitions. Growing up as a kid in bible class, I sometimes heard of God's grace as the forgiveness of sins or the covering or overlooking of sin. But in a closer look at scripture, it's often much more than that.

Hebrews 4:16 says "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

And Acts 14:3 – "So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the

message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.”

In both those passages, the usage of the word grace is synonymous or interchangeable with the word power, or more specifically God’s enabling power. **It’s the power** that God willingly gives to help us do what we could never do on our own. And I believe that is the usage referred to in today’s gospel.

Grace upon grace is needed right about now. God’s enabling power is needed when we’re grieving. When we find ourselves traveling out of unexpected necessity. It’s needed when downsizing out of a beloved home, or right out of a home altogether and seeking shelter. Or to respond when called to a new ministry. It’s needed to work for justice, for righteousness, to answer our calling as Christians to love God and neighbor. None of those are things we can do alone without a double-stop at grace.

By Christmas, there’s already a lot of traveling involved in Jesus’s story. And we’re just 10 days away from Epiphany, when the Magi arrive to pay homage to the baby Jesus, no doubt experiencing grace

upon grace as they set out to find their way.

Today’s gospel reads like a love letter, urging us. Grace is not something that descends from on high out of thin air, but out of relationship: “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” We are invited to actively receive, not because we have to, but because we are beloved, by the Messiah, the great I Am, the Name Above All Names, Emmanuel, God-With-Us.

When we claim God’s grace, we will not always be accepted or understood in the world, and there’s days I don’t feel up to that. But in looking to our two fellow sojourners today, I take great encouragement.

I love that John was so rough around the edges with his camel hair shirt, living on locusts as he testified to the light. John embodied the definition of grace, living boldly within God’s enabling power even while often being misunderstood. And sojourning with Jesus Christ is altogether a different kind of travel... one that involves transformation and the renewing of our spirit. Our minds and souls, yes.

But also our very spirits become more expansive, and I long for that expansion.

And what of the question of why are there two stops at grace? Why grace upon grace?

Once we experience God's enabling power and come away changed, I suspect

we will never want to turn back. We are invited to keep growing in grace and make more than one stop, and in fact make many more than two in this action-packed, memorable itinerary of adventure. There's no waiting required. Next stop: grace upon grace, please.



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