

## 4 Lent 2009

The fourth Sunday in Lent is sometimes called Refreshment Sunday. We are now about at the halfway point in Lent, and some liturgical traditions observe a day of feasting in order to provide a brief respite from Lenten penitence and self-denial. Refreshment Sunday is meant to lighten our load along our Lenten journey, and remind us that we are not offered salvation through strenuous effort or impeccable behavior, but by grace.

The readings give us the opportunity to see ourselves as part of a longer history of God's grace in lightening the load of the faithful in their struggles. However, the readings also suggest that bodily and worldly desires are part of the problem: they are what distract people from their faith, requiring God's grace to intervene and redirect them toward spiritual matters. The text from Numbers recalls the journey of the Israelites at its nadir; in the depths of the desert, no Promised Land in sight, with no food or water, the Israelites reject the manna from heaven because it doesn't taste good. But after contending with a plague of serpents they assume were sent by God as punishment for their unfaithfulness, they repent and accept God's help through Moses and the bronze serpent. The serpent is not invested with magical powers, but rather serves as a tool for the Israelites to refocus their faith on God's promise of salvation. As the psalmist celebrates,

They abhorred all manner of food \*

and drew near to death's door.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, \*

and he delivered them from their distress.

He sent forth his word and healed them \*

and saved them from the grave.

In John's gospel, this saving "word" became flesh. The evangelist tells us that Jesus uses the episode of Moses and the serpent to make a point to Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, would certainly have been familiar with these references, but in seeking out Jesus under cover of night he must have been looking for a deeper level of meaning than his own scriptural knowledge could provide. Just like Guy Noir on *A Prairie Home Companion*, on "a dark night in a city that knew how to keep its secrets," it seemed that Nicodemus was one man who was still trying to find the answers to life's persistent questions. This excerpt is part of a longer conversation, which happens early in Jesus' ministry, and it is John's first foreshadowing of the Passion and resurrection. Jesus tells Nicodemus that just as the serpent was lifted up, so too would the Son of Man be lifted up. And like those who looked upon the serpent and lived, those who look upon Jesus with faith would receive God's life-giving grace. In order to make this point, John draws contrasts of light and dark, death and life, body and spirit—although these opposites are not as far removed from each other as they might seem. The serpent was remade from an instrument of death into the instrument of life; Jesus, who seems like a vehicle of condemnation, becomes one of grace. Jesus tells us not to fear God's judgment, because we have already been weighed in the balance and not found wanting. All we have to do is believe in God's love. Jesus, like the serpent, is meant to refocus our faith on God's promise of salvation.

In today's letter to the Ephesians, Paul reassures his listeners of that promise. During the Reformation, Luther and Calvin used these texts to critique the medieval church for its message that salvation was dependent upon good works or behavior. The Reformation thinkers reversed this equation: we do not do good works in order to be saved, but because we are saved. Paul tells us that because grace is freely given, good works are

themselves products of that grace. We are condemnable but not condemned. Therefore, our lives should be vehicles for doing God's will, motivated by gratitude for the grace we do not deserve but have yet received. Grace is very democratic: none are more or less deserving than others. It would probably be unfair of God to expect otherwise when our capacity to do good is so unreliable. God created us as material beings with material needs and human failings. But the readings today tell us that God gives us the means of choosing the light over darkness, and living our lives accordingly.

What does it mean to live in the light? In my own life, I have been blessed by family and loved ones who have had many opportunities to condemn me for mistakes made, but who have loved me anyway. They love me as I am, rather than who they might want me to be, and this unconditional love has led them to make sacrifices on my behalf. I have been the recipient of grace, but have I given in the same selfless, generous, sacrificial way to others? I wish I could say yes, but I'm afraid I come up short. I get distracted by earthly concerns, and by my own emotions of fear or resentment or anger. It is not easy to be either the recipient or the giver of grace.

So I was astounded by a true story I read recently, reported by William Yardley in the *New York Times* last year. Every day at one of the many Starbucks in Seattle, a woman who stood in line and the woman who made her coffee would take a minute for a friendly chat. One day, during this morning chat, the two of them disintegrated into tears and began hugging each other. It turned out that the customer was to become the proud owner of one of the barista's kidneys. The customer had had kidney disease for years but recently the situation had deteriorated. None of her children or

family members was a match, so she put herself on the donor list and prepared to wait years. She kept the situation to herself, but one day, when she was feeling particularly burdened, she happened to mention her dilemma to the coffee barista. Without missing a beat, the barista said, "I'm going to get myself tested." When she discovered she was a match, she immediately offered her kidney to her customer. The transplant was successful, and both women are apparently doing well.<sup>1</sup>

This is what it means to live in the light: opening ourselves to be the givers and receivers of grace, and to be surprised by its unexpectedness and renewed by its generosity. In a world that is dark and sinful, what other options do we have? For sometimes the light is dim or hard to make out at all. How do we live in the light in these dark days? The darkness of recession, unemployment, and war? The darkness of illness and death? Where is the light in the sudden death this week of a young college student, who was killed in a car crash? Where is the light in the knowledge that she not only died unexpectedly in the prime of her youth but almost certainly suffered pain and fear in her last moments? Where is the deliverance for her family from their distress? Where is the redemption, the means of death transformed into life?

I don't know. I don't think any of us does. I do know that we are blessed in this community of St. Paul's to be accepted not only in our faith but in our doubt. Here we are the recipients of grace: accepted as we are rather than how we should be, as we grapple with life's persistent questions. All we can do is to ask God to help us embrace the light and to live our lives as models of that light by showing the same grace to others that we have been shown. We cannot overcome our shortcomings, our frailties, and the supreme vulnerability of our humanity, but God can and has and does. The darkness

is there, but "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

The theologian Paul Tillich once commented that grace is not just about forgiveness or gifts, although these are important components. Instead, he says that "In grace something is overcome; grace occurs in spite of something; grace occurs in spite of separation and estrangement. Grace is the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with itself. Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected...There is something triumphant in the word grace: in spite of the abounding of sin, grace abounds much more."

Tillich then invites us to remain open to being what he calls "struck by grace." Since he puts it better than I ever could, I would like to quote his words at some length:

"Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

"Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do

not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*' If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but *acceptance*."<sup>2</sup>

So as we travel towards the Passion and resurrection of Jesus, let us pause on this Refreshment Sunday and embrace Tillich's invitation to allow ourselves to be struck by grace. Let us open ourselves to the refreshment and restoration of God's unconditional acceptance. God has promised, through Jesus, to lighten our load of humanity by that gift of grace. That "God so loved the world," let us rejoice and be glad. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> William Yardley, "A Donor Match Over Small Talk and Coffee," *New York Times*, March 4, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/04/us/04barista.html?scp=1&sq=Yardley%20Anderson%20Ausnes&st=cse> (accessed March 19, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted," in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=378&C=84> (accessed March 19, 2009).