***GRACE IN WAITING, NOT GRACE-IN-WAITING***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

December 3, 2023

Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 and Mark 13:32-37

 In his little book, *All About Christmas*, our friend Jim Simpson shares a thoughtful quote from Eliabeth Berryhill. She muses:

*If I had been around that first Christmas, I am convinced that I would have seen and heard Nothing. I would have been so busy cleaning the living room, or worrying about deductions and how not to pay the capital gains tax, that I wouldn’t have looked up to see any stars, let alone that special one that suddenly was there where no star had ever been before.*

*I would have been so uneasy about the state of the world, so anxious about where I was going to live and what I was going to do tomorrow, so frightened by a sense of chaos and a nagging suspicion that life means nothing at all, that I would not even have heard a whole massed group of choirs and orchestras playing and singing fortissimo “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, Peace, good will to men,” let alone one solitary angel voice saying quietly and firmly: “Do not be afraid.”*

*I’d have been so rooted to the spot, so surrounded by habit, so fixed in what I knew that I knew, I could not even have run down from the nearby hills, let alone embarked upon a long and dangerous journey across miles and miles of trackless desert, where all there was to see (I’d have been sure) was just another squawling baby, like any other newborn squawling little baby whose mother and father were nobodies from a nothing little town somewhere out across the hills. Yes, if I’d been around and been me on that first Christmas the whole thing would have gone right past me, I’m positive. So lucky for me that, being me, I’m here now.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Does she speak for you in those words? We too are here now, but her thoughts might describe us, not only then and there, but here and now! Are we any less distracted, any less oblivious, any less worried about the state of the world, any less fixed in what we know, any less discerning about God’s coming among us today than we would have been on that silent night in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago?

 “*About that day and hour, no one knows*,” says Jesus. “*Be aware. Keep alert. For, you do not know when the time will come*.” The people in Bethlehem did not know that the Savior would be born that night, and after two thousand years, we still do not know the day or hour when Christ will return. Many of us – most of us, I daresay – have stopped waiting and watching and being alert to the possibility that today might be the day that Christ comes again. There are those who do nothing but wait and watch for him, those who are so focused upon that day that they are oblivious to the present needs all around them. They are those who are waiting for God’s grace to break in upon us in glorious fashion with the coming of Christ with a heavenly host trailing behind him. But that is NOT what Jesus is suggesting we do or how we should wait. Rather, he tells us to be alert in our waiting for his return, to be grace-filled even if not graceful (for some of us that ship has long since sailed) in our waiting as we live and serve in loving, gracious, grace-filled ways.

 When our kids were young, we went back to Slippery Rock to visit my parents. We pulled into the driveway and almost before the car came to a stop, my mom and dad had arrived at the van, opened the sliding door, taken the kids out of their car seats and into their arms, and were off to the house in a flurry of hugs and kisses. Karen and I were left behind, debating whether any of them would notice if we just left and went out to a quiet dinner, but instead we began to bring in the luggage and the travel crib and the 500 pounds of kid’s stuff that traveled with us wherever we went in those days. As we entered the house, we found my mom sitting in a rocking chair reading to Emily and my dad on the floor with Dan; my parents seemed almost startled to discover that we had arrived too. They were waiting expectantly for the arrival of their grandkids, but they had not been idle in their waiting; supper was on the stove, the kids’ toys and books were out and ready for them, and all else was in good order for our stay.

 Jesus urges us to be so intentional about preparing while we are waiting for his return, to be actively doing while we are waiting, not sitting idly by twiddling our thumbs in wide-eyed anticipation. And the doing he urges upon us is the same doing that we heard about last Sunday in that passage from Matthew 25: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison, heal the sick, serve your neighbor. Our waiting is to be active waiting, a grace-filled anticipation in which God’s will is done here on earth as it is in heaven.

 Today is the first Sunday in Advent, and it can be tempting to lay aside all that doing for others in order to prepare to celebrate Christ’s coming by shopping for presents and baking mountains of cookies and sending out Christmas cards and decorating the whole house and, if necessary, the whole neighborhood, and certainly the whole church. Advent can be a hectic, busy time. But with what are you busy this Advent season as you wait to celebrate Jesus’ coming and return? Are you busy with the grace-filled things that he showed us and told us to be busy with – love your neighbor, welcome the stranger, serve the Lord?

 In that portion of his letter to the Corinthians that we heard this morning, Paul opens with thanksgiving for God’s grace showered upon them and God’s grace evident in them:

*I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony to Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul speaks of these early Christians as those who are waiting – waiting for the revealing of Jesus Christ decades after his death and resurrection. He gives thanks, not just for their waiting, but for the grace given to them that has enriched their faith and lives during their waiting, and for the grace lived out through them in speech and knowledge and the sharing of their spiritual gifts – their *charismata* which is a word rooted in that same grace for which he gave thanks to God. As Chuck Campbell notes:

*Here, grace is a dynamic power or energy within the people that bears fruit among them; grace moves with a power and activity similar to that of the spirit….The grace of Jesus Christ encompasses the entirety of the community’s life …as the power for faithful living.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

It is grace that was evident in their lives and in their life together. And I wonder: Would Paul write similar sentiments to us were he writing to us or about us today? Would he speak of grace so evident in our lives and in our life together?

 Today we lit the first of five Advent candles as we countdown the weeks to Christmas; as I always remind the candlelighters, the goal is to light the candle, not the wreath! Today we successfully lit the candle of hope and then will come peace and joy and love and then on Christmas Eve, the Christ candle to celebrate Jesus’ arrival. Absent from that litany of candles is the candle of grace; now perhaps that is because they ran out of candles or of weeks to light yet another candle, or perhaps it is because it would be hard to dislodge any of the other candles to make room for a candle of grace. But that does not mean that grace is missing from our Advent preparation. Perhaps it is there in the greenery among which those candles reside, an evergreen reminder of God’s ever-present grace that endures more subtly, but no less importantly, across this Advent season.

*Grace*, writes Frederick Buechner, *is something you can never get but only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

It is in short, a gift, and in this season of gift-giving, grace should be foremost in our minds, in our actions, and in our waiting for the one who comes as God’s great gift to us. As you prepare your homes and your hearts for Christmas, may you make space for grace to mark your days and your nights and your lives and your waiting. For, *about that day or hour, no one knows*, says Jesus. No one. So, who knows, that day – that glorious grace-filled day – might be today! Amen

1. Elizabeth Berryhill quoted by James A. Simpson in *All About Christmas*, Gordon Wright Publishing:1994, p.92 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Charles Campbell in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol.1, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor eds., Westminster John Knox Press:2008, p.17 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row Publishers:1973, p.33 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)