

God's Outrageous Generosity

In the beautiful country of Sri Lanka, is a complex rock fortress called Sigiriya. A palace was built on it many centuries ago. It reminds me a bit of Machu Picchu in Peru, which is on my bucket list, and of Masada in southern Israel: an amazing place, full of beauty, and craftsmanship. Thousands of tourists visit every year. A part of its attraction is a huge fresco painted on the rock walls about half-way up. The site is considered a National treasure, and UNESCO lists it as a world heritage site.

Some years ago, some of the frescoes were vandalized: ink and paint thrown and splattered over them. It took experts weeks of painstaking effort to restore them to their original state. Thankfully, they succeeded.

Human sin is comparable. Sinful acts get the attention: things like lying, stealing, adultery, etc. But in reality, those acts are just symptoms. Paul Tillich said sin is a state—a condition—before it is an action. The biblical understanding is that sin is something that happens to us. Its source is satan (in the original languages, that's not a proper name. It always, in the original language, is preceded by the definite article, "the satan;" literally, "the accuser," or "the adversary.") "The Adversary" is everything God is not, and nothing God is. If God is light, "the adversary" is darkness.

So, "The Adversary" throws temptations or urges or obsessions in our path—like ink and paint thrown on frescoes; and if we succumb to those obstacles (and we do have a choice), then we enter a condition of separation—from God, from others, and from our true selves. We're not grounded in truth or faith, and therefore our actions are selfish, uncaring, and ultimately self-destructive.

And yet, there remains within us that "God" part—that image of God in which we are created—that connection with our creator. It's like a homing device that's tuned into God's grace. In words adapted from Paul Tillich:

Grace calls out to us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It calls out to us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It calls out to us when we feel our separation deeply, because we have violated another life.

It calls out to us when our loathing for our own being—our indifference, our weakness, our hostility and lack of direction—become intolerable. It calls out to us when, year after year we resolve to spend more time with family or with self and watch those resolutions go down in flames, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, and despair destroys all joy and courage.

Tillich summarizes: "Sometimes in those moments a wave of light breaks into our darkness as if a voice were saying, 'You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of whom you do not know.' Don't ask for the name now; maybe you'll find it later. Don't try to do anything now; maybe later you'll do much. Don't seek for anything, don't perform anything, don't intend anything. Simply accept

the fact that you are accepted."

That experience is called *Grace*. Nothing is demanded; no religious or moral or intellectual prequalification—nothing but acceptance—nothing but surrender and yielding to being accepted. And in that surrender, we experience the grace of being able to look frankly into the eyes of another person—and more importantly, we experience the grace of being able to look confidently, with total peace of mind, into the eyes of God. Tillich calls it, "...nothing less than the miraculous reunion of life with life."

The Lectionary readings for this 2nd Sunday after Christmas express praise and thanksgiving for God's grace, which can be defined as outrageous generosity. The first three readings contrast that generosity with the human condition apart from God's ongoing participation in creation.

- Jeremiah speaks of impending exile, where despair and grief seem the only realities.
- The Psalm laments the seeming eternity of winter's grasp, with God sending "snow like wood" and "frost like ashes."
- John's Gospel opens with reference to a darkness in which humans can't even see how to proceed for themselves. But the "Word-becomes-flesh," and God breaks into the darkness with light.

All three of these texts point to human helplessness and hopelessness apart from God, but also declare praise in response to God's actions—indeed, God's nature—of rescue and salvation.

The text from Ephesians declares, not simply that God will, but also that God al-ready has invaded the world and caused a new world to come into being. Notice the prepositions as we read:

<p>EPHESIANS 1:3-14 (NRSV) <i>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us <u>in Christ</u> with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us <u>in Christ</u> before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children <u>through Jesus Christ</u>, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us <u>in the Beloved</u>. ⁷<u>In him</u> we have</i></p>	<p><i>redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. things in heaven and things on earth. ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth <u>in Christ</u>, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things <u>in him</u>, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹<u>In Christ</u> we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the</i></p>	<p><i>lishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope <u>on Christ</u>, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³<u>In him</u> you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed <u>in him</u>, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.</i></p>
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"In Christ..." "Through Christ..." "In Him..." Maybe you noticed the underlinings

as we read the text: eleven times in as many verses, the writer uses that terminology. We see the same pattern in the opening verses of the Colossian letter. But another thing always grabs my attention when I read this text, beginning with the 4th verse: “...he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world...”

And again in verse 9: “...he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time..”

You see, what the Lectionary texts describe, namely God's grace, has been a part of God's will—a part of God's plan—from the beginning of creation! God's choosing has no beginning. John's Gospel begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” In the beginning! So it is impossible to identify the beginning of God's Christ! In the same way, and for the same reason, it is impossible to conceive of a time when God did not choose on behalf of humankind!

Grace is not God's afterthought in response to a problem. Grace is not a quick fix for broken humanity: it is deeply rooted in God's nature to act on behalf of creation. And so the writer begins this letter: “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...*”