

Grace Upon Grace

John 1 (Selected)

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.

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 human will, 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.

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

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John 1 (Selected)

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

December 24, 2022

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

Right now, I'd like to ask if it would be ok if we all just took a break for a few minutes. Would that be all right? This the 25th Christmas Eve I've celebrated here on the Park in Canton, NY (I know, who thought I would last this long, right?). I look around here tonight, and I see more than a few who have been here, usually every year, for that same span. Through that time, our Christmas Eve service together has become comfortable, with our traditions of horn blowing, caramel corn, the ever-popular erroneous Christmas Eve story, familiar carols and scripture, and, of course, ending with all of us, singing Silent Night with candle in hand.

II.

Beyond being *comfortable*, though, I hope that the service is also a *comfort* to you. With the arrival of each Christmas Eve service, I, like you I am sure, become increasingly aware of those who are no longer present with us. Let's be honest, Christmas is hard. Hard on our finances, hard on our time, and hard, in a deep down kind of way, on our emotions. Which of us here would not give just about anything, to sit on our grandfather's knee once more, or have a piece of that pie that only mom could make, or feel the butterflies in our stomach lying in bed as a child on Christmas eve, or see our kids in their footie pajamas once more, or bake cookies with our grandma, or stay snuggled in bed early Christmas morning with our spouse, as we counted the many blessings of our lives.

III.

And, of course, as adults, what makes Christmas so special for all of us, is to see it through the eyes of children, because, sometimes, seeing Christmas through our own can be very hard. Like all of you, I get to this moment, at the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service and I think, "Sweet Santa, here it is again another Christmas." And then, seemingly "poof" it's gone. So, I thought it might be good, for us to just take a break for a few minutes, that we might soak it all in, have a few minutes to reflect, or, at the very least, catch our breath.

IV.

I began by mentioning that this is my 25th Candle Light service on the Park. Tonight I would like to tell you a story about my very first Christmas Eve service. Obviously, there was a lot of pressure placed on the new minister with the long hair, who had been here all of four months at that point. Back then, a few of the more “stiff-necked” members of the congregation were clear in expressing to me they didn’t want any *new fangled* stuff; stick to the basics, keep it short, and do NOT mess it up. I was, I confess, a little bit nervous. Not so much because of these admonitions, but because I knew then, like I know now, how much this service means to all of you.

Oh, sure, there are some tough nuts here tonight who hem and haw because they *have* to go to church on Christmas Eve, but once here they realize this one hour is a gift which helps us to remember what Christmas is all about, and what Christmas has meant to each of us in our lives. That first service, like Christmas in general, was a bit of blur but it came off just fine. Truth is, on such a night as Christmas Eve, it is a very gracious congregation which will forgive just about any sin with the exception of too long a sermon, which I’m in danger of committing, so on with the story.

V.

When that 1st Christmas Eve service was over I took my time closing down the church, making sure to shut off all of the lights, turned down the heat throughout the building and gathered up my things to head home and collapse. But, just as I was standing at the front door of the church fishing my key out of my pocket to lock it, I had this strange and inexplicable sense, like a whisper in my ear, that I should go back into the sanctuary. I fumbled my way up the stairs in the dark and opened that door right there to peek in and take one last look. And here, between the pulpit and what was, then, a real and very large Christmas tree from Fred and Helen Selleck’s farm, was a lone candle, still burning bright. I remember thinking to myself, “Great, you’ve been here four months and you came *that* close to burning the church down; and on Christmas Eve no less!”

VI.

Over the past 25 years, I’ve told that story a few times to some to illustrate the importance of attending to the details of ministry; and, to occasionally remind *myself* how fortunate I have been in my ministry here among you. Over the span of those years, though, the experience of that moment has

never faded; it remains an amazingly clear and vivid memory. The sanctuary air and all the furnishings were warm and the entire room smelled of candle wax and pine. I could still feel the presence of all those who had just departed. And it was quiet, oh so very quiet, but there was a *weight* to it. Not an absence of sound, but the presence of something with a voice that choose to be quiet, calm and peaceful. Then, there was the light. Just one candle burning radiantly, defiantly, gloriously against a huge void of darkness, which could not over come it.

VII.

Each year on Christmas Eve we use the lessons of scripture, and the carols inspired by them, to recount the story of the birth of the Christ child. Tonight's reading, from the first Chapter of John's Gospel, is, in the same way, a birth narrative; but of a very different sort. Rather than a child born in a manger, we read of the Word, the logos, not born, but pre-existing with the Creator, through whom all things, then and now, come into being. At a point, this Word became flesh, and dwelt with shepherds and Magi, and, as spirit, dwells among each of us still. And to all who receive the Word, power is given to become the very children of God. Because through the Word, through the Christ Child, through the Holy Spirit, we may recognize, especially on Christmas Eve, the grace and truth of God's glory.

VIII.

Christmas is a time when we imagine the glory of God as trumpets blaring, stars guiding and choirs of angels singing. But, the truth is, the glory of God is like that single, forgotten candle which remained lit 25 years ago this night. Ever burning, mostly unnoticed, in the background and recesses of our lives, but always victorious in keeping the darkness at bay. And from this light we receive, in each new day, the gift of what the Gospel writer calls, Grace upon Grace. As you go tonight from this holy place, I pray that you might be moved by that grace to hear God whispering in *your* ear, beckoning you to go back to the sanctuary in your heart where the light of God will always shine with a brightness which the darkness shall never overcome. Merry Christmas. Amen.