

Sermon, Christmas 1A, December 29, 2024  
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**Isaiah 61:10-62:3**

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness...  
...and you shall be called by a new name  
that the mouth of the LORD will give.  
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,  
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

**Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7**

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

**But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son**, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, **so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.**

**John 1:1-18**

In the beginning was the Word...

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.

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This week's sermon came together a lot less easily than I had hoped. I think the problem was that I kept wanting the scriptures to somehow conform to and justify my expectations for my own household and family, and the scriptures just kept refusing to cooperate.

In today's Gospel, John writes: ***From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.***

Just to be clear: John is talking about Jesus. Because it is clear that John is definitely NOT talking about me. Only the most naive and charitable observer would make the mistake of describing me as "full of grace": especially during the Christmas and Easter Seasons, when a *marked increase* in expectations and demands at church and home, predictably correlates with a *marked decrease* in the patience and grace I extend to the members of my household.

A case in point: Christmas Eve. 4pm. My middle child, Johanna, was at church, preparing to rehearse some music and serve as an acolyte for the 5pm service. All the rest of my household, on the other hand, was conspicuously absent from the 4pm call time for lighting luminarias. When my eldest child, Alex, walked in at 4:15 I said "OK. You are readmitted to the family, I guess.." "Um, good...I think???" was their somewhat bewildered and apprehensive reply.

**If you're looking for some Good News this morning, here it is: Belonging to the Household of God is fundamentally different from belonging to the Household of Mother Sylvia.**

It's so easy for me—perhaps for many of us— to become trapped in a culture of demands and expectations. We are frustrated by our own limitations, and in turn we feel disappointed and betrayed by the limitations of others. It's so easy to believe we have to do something to prove our worthiness, to earn our belonging. And it's so easy to project those same demands and expectations on others.

This is, in fact, the basic dilemma that precipitated Paul's letter to the Galatians (a portion of which we heard in today's 2nd reading). In the 1st Century Church of Galatia, some Jewish followers of Jesus are trying to convince Gentile followers of Jesus that they, too, must fully adopt observance of Jewish Law—including circumcision—if they want to be fully included as members of God's Family. To this demand, Paul says an unequivocal "No. They don't."

I doubt that many of us gathered at St. Mark's for worship this morning—online or in person—feel particularly burdened by the demands and expectations of Jewish Law. But I'd bet that MOST of us DO feel burdened by demands and expectations of one kind or another—be they the demands of our parents, or children, or spouses, or peers, or roommates; or the demands of work, or religion, or culture, or social media or politics, or school, or marketers, or the economy.

I wonder—as you sit here this morning, what expectations and demands are weighing you down, constraining your ability to live and love as freely and fully as you desire—and as God desires for you? I'd like to invite us to Listen again to Paul's words to the Church in Galatia, this time replacing "The Law" with whatever DEMANDS & EXPECTATIONS OF THE WORLD are weighing you down:

*Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under THE DEMANDS & EXPECTATIONS OF THE WORLD until faith would be revealed. Therefore THE DEMANDS & EXPECTATIONS OF THE WORLD were our disciplinarian until Christ came.. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.*

***When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under THE DEMANDS & EXPECTATIONS OF THE WORLD , in order to redeem those who were under THE DEMANDS & EXPECTATIONS OF THE WORLD , so that we might receive adoption as children.***

***And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.***

**If you're looking for some Good News this morning, here it is: CHRIST HAS COME, AND YOU ARE NO LONGER A SLAVE TO THE DEMANDS & EXPECTATIONS OF THE WORLD. YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD.**

We hear this same Good News echoed in today's Gospel. John writes:

***To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.***

The authority, the right, the power to become a child of God isn't contingent on our performance, or perfection, or obedience to the demands and expectations of this world. The authority, the right, the power to become a child of God is only contingent on RECEIVING the Gift God has already sent.

The Gift we've been given, by the Spirit of God's Son within us, is the gift of Power. The ***Power—to long for God...The Power to cry out to God...the power to admit our need of God and our love of God...the power of relationship...the power to claim our true identity, with and through Jesus, as a beloved Child in the Family of God.***

In his essay "The Shock of Faith", Journalist David Brooks writes:

***"I've been grateful to have to learn and relearn yet another startling truth, that faith is about yearning, but it's not about striving. You can't earn God's love with good behavior and lofty thoughts, because he's already given it to you as the lavish gift that you don't deserve."***

Lutheran Pastor Elisabeth Johnson puts it this way:

***“Our adoption as God’s children is pure gift. Jesus alone is Son of God from birth, but he deigns to share his kinship and inheritance with us.”***

This is hard to comprehend. Gifts can be scary. Gifts make no sense. Except in a context of a relationship of love. Receiving a gift requires trust in the Giver.

If there is a theme that emerges from all three of today’s scripture readings it is this:

***The Power to BE comes before Power to DO***

***And this Power comes from God as pure gift.***

*Isaiah writes:*

*I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness...  
and you shall **be** called by a new name  
that the mouth of the LORD will give.  
You shall **be** a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,  
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*

*Paul writes:*

*God sent his Son, ... so that we might receive adoption as children. And because **you are** children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"*

*John writes:*

*But to all who received him... he gave **power to become** children of God...*

***This Power comes from God as pure gift.***

***But there's still MORE Good News.***

***The Power to BE comes before Power to DO.*** But the power to Do will surely come, too. For if the power at work within us is indeed the Spirit of Jesus, then the power to become Children of God is only the beginning. If the Power at work within us is the Power of the Spirit of Jesus, then we will surely, in time, discover as He did, that the power to become a Child of God, is the same power that will enable us to withstand Temptation, the power that will enable us to teach, to heal, to serve, to forgive, to lay down our lives and take them up again; the power that, in time, will enable us to love what God loves, to will what God wills, to share more and more fully in God's work in the world.

On this 5th day of Christmas the Scriptures remind us that the season of Gift-Giving isn't over, for God is the ultimate and eternal, inexhaustible Gift-Giver. For the 12 days of Christmas and for every day of our life, God gives us the power to become children of God. God continually sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba! Father!" reminding us who and whose we truly are, confirming our place in the family of God. And we can trust that, over time, our own capacity for love and good works will increase. Not SO that we can EARN or DEFEND or MAINTAIN or PROVE our right to be Children of God, but simply by virtue of our ongoing proximity to the Father whose abundant love and goodness will continually enfold and shape and direct us.

*And because **we are** children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"*

Today may we receive, and rejoice in this gift.

May we rest in this gift, knowing that

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