3/9-10/19 Prevenient Grace Rev. Amy Haines

Deut 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13 Lent

In two weeks, many families in Springboro and surrounding communities will be embarking on the journey of Spring Break. Since Spring Break is not during Holy Week this year, even my family plans to get out of town for a few days. In order to determine where we are headed, I reflect on past vacations and dream of where else we might go.

Consider other journeys you are planning for or have completed in your household.

The journey of graduation and moving into the next chapter of life. The journey of learning to live together as a newly married couple, or the journey of learning how to live alone after the kids move out, after divorce, or after the death of a spouse. There is the journey of work, which may begin with an emphasis on paying off debt, then move into working for a promotion, then striving to finish well before retirement. Sometimes health limits us to the journey of finding enough strength to move from the chair to the bed, or from one room to the other.

Life is a series of journeys, and one of the most important journeys we all embark on is the journey called faith. While some people joyfully embrace faith in Jesus, others reject a God they cannot see. Still others may hit a pause button in the midst of struggle or sorrow, while others take a tentative step forward. Whether we believe in Jesus or reject God, we all are on a journey called faith.

If you were to map out your faith journey, would it be a straight line, or more a wandering path that might include some roadblocks, some detours, and a highway or two? If we are honest,

many of our faith journeys will look a lot like our Israelite ancestors wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.

Yet, even in the midst of that desert wilderness, our Israelites ancestors knew that God was with them, in pillar and in cloud. They knew that they were claimed by God and called by God.

They knew that they were the recipients of God’s judgment and God’s compassion. They confessed that at times they were faithful, and at times they questioned their faith.

In our Scripture today from Deuteronomy, we encounter the journey of our faith ancestors reiterated through story and ritual, through offering and praise. When they moved into the Promised Land, they were instructed during each first fruits offering to pause and remember who and whose they are, God’s beloved children called to trust, called to remember and called to follow where God led them. Their ancestor was a wandering Aramean, a nomad without a home. They prospered, then lived as refugees who became slaves. Yet God heard their cries.

God led them out of Egypt, and God cared for them during the journey to the Promised Land.

As they finally stood on the edge of the Promised Land, after forty years in the wilderness, they recognized that throughout their journey God was with them, and they were still the recipients of God’s mercy and God’s grace.

Their faith journey reminds us of our own journeys, and especially now our communal journey of faith in this season of the church year called Lent. Lent is the 40 days plus Sundays that intentionally take us from ashes and wilderness to the cross and empty tomb. Lent is the season of the church year where personally and communally we remember who and whose we are, we reflect on what God has done for us through Jesus, and we renew our faith in God’s Son Jesus, who died on the cross to save us from our sins and was risen from the dead with a promise for us of forgiveness and new life.

During this Lenten season, as we journey ever closer to the cross, I invite you to embark on a journey of grace, recognizing and responding to God’s heart for us and God’s presence in our lives.

When we ponder this journey of grace, we recognize that this is a journey that begins before birth and continues after death, a journey that begins with God’s call and transitions into eternal life.

As we embark on this incredible journey of grace, we first need to pause and ask, “What is grace?”

If you were to take a poll on the street that asked, “What is grace?” the answers to that poll would vary greatly. Some would define grace as a prayer spoken before a meal. Grace might be spoken of as the movement of a ballerina or the name of a person you know. Grace might also be described as kindness and love or as thankfulness and goodness.

Grace is something we sing about it all of the time. We throw the word grace around in church and when speaking about God.

But, what is God’s grace? The Greek word translated as grace means gift. Grace is undeserved kindness, God’s unmerited favor toward us. Grace is the gift of God’s unconditional love for us that we cannot earn and do not deserve, yet receive anyway.

This notion of God’s grace is really what sets us apart as Christians from the other religions of the world.

.. During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities.

Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death.

The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. “What’s the [commotion] about?” he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”

The notion of God’s love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of Karma, the Jewish covenant, and the Muslim code of law—each of these offers a way to earn approval.

Only Christianity dares to make God’s love unconditional.

--Perfect Illustrations for Every Topic and Occasion, pp. 116-117;

citation: Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing about Grace?

quoted by Jonathan McLeod 8-06 found on sermoncentral.com

Grace is God’s unconditional love for us.

But as we live in the midst of the American I’ll-do-it-my-way society, accepting a gift of grace is hard for us to do.

..We are engrained with the idea: the more and harder we work the more we will receive in return.

--Jeremy Herr 1-03 sermoncentral.com adapted

..When a person works an eight-hour day and receives a fair day's pay for his time, that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for his performance, that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for his long service or high achievements, that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award—yet receives such a gift anyway—that is a good picture of God's unmerited favor. This is what we mean when we talk about the grace of God.

--G.W. Knight, Clip-Art Features for Church Newsletters, p. 53. Sermonillustrations.com

During this season of Lent, grace is what we see displayed on the cross, as well as in the emptiness of the tomb. Grace is God going to incredible lengths, time and again, to move us from selfishness to otherness, from our ways to God’s ways, from trying to earn our faith to receiving faith as a gift.

As Ephesians 2 proclaims: (Ephesians 2:8-10)

“*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”*

Grace is the gift of God’s unrelenting love for us. This love was evident for the family of Abraham. This love was evident in leading the Israelites to the Promised Land. This love was evident when Saul became Paul, moving from persecutor to proclaimer of faith in Christ. This love is evident in our lives, as God continues to reach out to us with radical, unconditional unrelenting love.

As United Methodists who follow in the footsteps of John Wesley, grace is a central component of our faith journey, lifelong grace that never stops reaching out to us in love. John Wesley called this his “Scripture way of salvation.”

..“While the grace of God is undivided, it precedes salvation as ‘prevenient grace,’ continues in ‘justifying grace,’ and is brought to fruition in ‘sanctifying grace.’”

-William Willimon United Methodist Beliefs, chapter 6

Thinking of grace in these terms remind us that the grace of God is active before we are ever aware of it, continues as we come to faith in Jesus, and encourages us as we live by faith the rest of our earthly lives.

We move forward in faith with a growing awareness of who God is and what Jesus has done for us and what we are called to do in response. Yet this journey of faith, this journey of grace, begins before we are ever aware of God.

John Wesley called this “prevenient” grace, or the grace that comes before. Before we even think about God, before we even recognize that God is involved in our salvation, before we fully embrace who God is and who we are in relation to God, before we have an abiding trust in God’s love, before we know the gift of God through Jesus—before all of that, God is there. Wooing us. Reaching out to us. Drawing us into a deeper awareness, then a deeper desire, then a deeper relationship. Loving us. Claiming us. Calling us. That is prevenient grace.

Prevenient grace reaches out to us from the moments of our births. Prevenient grace reaches out to us even when we are serving other gods, including the gods of success and appearance, of relationships and independence. Prevenient grace reaches out to us even when we seek to ignore or reject or run away from God. Prevenient grace is the relentless love of God that pursues us and meets us wherever we are. There is no place we can run that God is not there.

There is nothing that we can do to make God love us less. Throughout our lives, God is seeking to love us through such amazing, prevenient grace.

In seminary one of my classmates told how her call story began in God’s prevenient grace.

She had been baptized as a young child in the church, and as many ways as she sought to run away from God, as much as she engaged in the desires of the flesh in this world, she knew she could never outrun God’s love. She had been claimed by the waters of baptism, claimed as a beloved daughter of God. In the quiet of night, in the love of family, in unexpected moments, she would be reminded who and whose she was, claimed as a daughter of God in the moment of baptism, reminded that God still loved her. This was her experience of God’s prevenient grace.

When we recognize God’s prevenient grace in our lives, we will next be led to God’s justifying grace, the grace that leads to faith in Jesus and the good news that our salvation is through Jesus. We will cover more on justifying grace next weekend.

Prevenient-justifying-sanctifying grace—it is all God’s gift of unconditional love. But for this grace to be effective in our lives, we first must receive such a gift.

However, consider the ways of the world and the selfish desires of our hearts that strive to tempt us away from receiving the gift of God’s love. Our temptations can be seen in Jesus’ temptations. Today’s Scripture from Luke reminds us that before Jesus ever opened his mouth to teach, before Jesus ever reached out his hand to heal, before Jesus was ever surrounded by a crowd, he spent 40 days in the barren desert wilderness of Judea and there was tempted as we are tempted.

For the first temptation the devil said to Jesus, “If you are the son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

Jesus was hungry. He had not eaten for 40 days. What would it hurt if he used his powers to fulfill his own needs? What would it hurt for the son of God to re-create a stone into a loaf of bread?

How often do we act to satisfy our own desires without thought to how our actions affect others? How often do we use whatever power we have to get what we want?

The devil was asking Jesus to use his power to serve himself, yet that is not who Jesus was called to be as the Son of God. Jesus was called to sacrifice himself for others, to die for our salvation, not to use his power to satisfy his own cravings and basic needs.

We do not live only to have our basic human desires met. We do not live only to eat, drink and be merry. We live to be a reflection of God in this world, as part of a flawed yet forgiven community called the church.

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 in reply, “One does not live by bread alone.”

Our personal desires are not the be all and end all of life.

For the second temptation the devil said to Jesus, “To you I will give the glory and authority of all the kingdoms of the world, if you will but worship me.”

Here the devil is offering all of the rulers and powers of this world to Jesus, offering an easy way to gain control over the nations without suffering and sacrifice. Yet this easy street of glory comes at a price—for who or what we allow to control us becomes the god whom we worship.

Jesus knew that success in this world often takes our focus away from faithfulness to God.

Jesus knew that if we do not worship the one true God we will worship in God’s place the devil or money or power or fame or control.

This temptation strives to pull us away from a relationship with God, away from accepting the grace of God in our lives, in order to be our own god.

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:13 in reply, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

No one else can take the place of God.

For the final temptation the devil said to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from this temple, for as Psalm 91 says, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you; on their hands they will bear you up, so you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

If Jesus had wanted to wow the crowd to get them to listen to him and believe in him, this miraculous display of God’s care could have been the answer. With such a miraculous show of God’s power and protection, the agony of the cross would later have been avoided. Jesus would have had more than his 15 minutes of fame—he would have put on a display that left no doubt about his identity.

God does not want us to be “wowed” into following Jesus. God does not want to merely entertain us—God seeks to save us.

How often, though, do we try to be the center of attention instead of pointing to God’s presence in our lives as our source of power, love and new life?

How often do we try and bargain with God, echoing the devil when the devil says to Jesus, “prove it.” Prove who you are, prove the power of God with a big show.

How often do we challenge God to act rather than trusting God to guide us even when we cannot see what is around the next bend. We think we are invincible, and God will save us from our own stupidity. We believe that we can act any way we want to act and not have to suffer the consequences of our actions. We test God rather than trust God.

And God is not interested in participating in our agendas—God wants us to trust his agenda, and follow his word.

So in reply Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:16, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Every day you and I are tempted. What can give us hope is that in spite of the times our human nature seeks sin, in spite of the ease in which the devil may lure us to give in to temptation, when we follow Jesus, when we trust in God, we can rely on Jesus’ example, God’s Word, and the Holy Spirit’s presence to overcome temptation.

We can look back and remember God’s presence and providence to those who have gone before us. We can look back and remember the ways God has been present with us, even in the wilderness. We can look back and remember our identity as beloved children of God. Then we can claim God’s prevenient grace, and move forward on the journey of grace, the journey of faith, the journey of life. God’s love calls us away from temptation. God’s love calls us away from selfish desire. God’s love calls us away from doubting our worth.

As we continue in this season of Lent, as we continue on this journey of grace, may we focus less on our temptations, and more on God’s faithfulness. May we focus less on our selfish desires, and more on God’s abundant love for all of us. May we focus less on what we do wrong, and more on the mighty power of God’s prevenient grace.

You are loved. Nothing you do will cause God to love you more, or love you less. So journey forward in life and faith, trusting in God’s amazing grace.

May it be so. Let us pray.