

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Christmas Eve Sermon
11:00 p.m.

The Appearance of Grace

Matthew 2: 1-12
Titus 2: 11-14

Rev. Dr. Galen E. Russell III
December 24, 2009

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.”

Prayer: God, you have made yourself known once again. May we see you and experience you again tonight Amen.

Merry Christmas, everyone! Have you ever waited for something that never comes? You wait and wait, and over time, you get tired of waiting. Pretty soon, what you're waiting for, little by little, drops out of the forefront of your mind. After a long time you forget about for what you were waiting.

When I was growing up, we had an Irish setter named Lindy. We had her since birth. This dog loved to run, and every chance she got, she bolted out of the house and ran away. And, every time, we bolted out after her trying to catch her but never did. We had to wait for her to come home, which she did... every time, except one particular time. That time, she got out and didn't come back. We waited for days, weeks, months. Pretty soon, we started to forget we were waiting for her. And, eventually we moved on. And, then, after a long time, waiting for Lindy was no longer on the forefront of our minds.

I think this is what happened to the Jewish people, including the head man, King Herod. The prophets long before had foretold the coming of the Messiah, and so they waited. And they waited. But, they waited so long that gradually they forgot about waiting, and then they forgot about the arrival of the Messiah. When word came that the King of the Jews was born, even King Herod couldn't remember where this event was to take place, and he was none too happy that a little baby was born to take his place!

I suppose old King Herod wouldn't have recognized the Messiah anyway so consumed was he with his own power and with the thought of protecting his throne. Those were the things on the forefront of his mind. He wouldn't know God's Messiah appearing if he came and bit him on the nose! Would we?

Reminds me of an email story that went around the Internet about a young violin player who played six Bach pieces in Washington D.C.'s Metro Station for about an hour. During that time approx two thousand people went through the station, most of them on their way to work. After 3 minutes a middle aged man noticed there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds and then hurried to meet his schedule. A woman threw a dollar bill in the hat and, without stopping, continued to walk. A young man leaned against the wall to listen to him, then looked at his watch and started to walk again. A three-year

old boy stopped but his mother tugged him along hurriedly. The kid stopped to look at the violinist again, but the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head all the time. About twenty gave money but continued to walk at their normal pace. After one hour, he finished playing and silence took over. No one noticed. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition. No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the greatest musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, on a Stradivarius violin worth 3.5 million dollars! Two days before Joshua Bell played at a sold out theater in Boston where the seats averaged \$100 (received in a personal email July 5, 2009). Would we recognize the Messiah?

In his letter to Titus, Paul refers to Jesus as the grace of God appearing to humanity. And, for many people who believe it, there is sheer joy at the new life found because grace has appeared! And, when it does, stop and give thanks to God. Give thanks because you will know the waiting is over. You will know the holy relief that comes from God. You will know that being held accountable for your differences with God will no longer be held against you, and never was held against you. This is your new reality—you are saved by grace! Such a new reality will change your life. Not only will you breathe “thank you, thank you, thank you, God,” but you will also know the real reason why we give gifts at Christmas time—because grace has appeared bringing salvation to all.

But, you have to believe that the grace of God has appeared. You have to recognize grace when it comes. Well-known Daily Guideposts author Pam Kidd tells of her experience in the city of Harare, Zimbabwe. She and her husband David, and their daughter Keri were taking part in a Christmas mission project in which they were delivering blankets and bread to children sleeping in back alleys and storm drains during the nighttime hours. But, they also were on another mission: Keri was avidly looking for a family of three they met earlier in the day because she purchased some clothes and blankets for the couple's baby. Just after midnight, they drove down several streets, and finally, they caught sight of a mound near an alley. On cardboard laid flat on the ground with a few rags, two adults huddled together. "It's them!" Keri cried out. And with that, she jumped out of the car and went straight to the family. Pam's husband David came up to Pam and whispered, "Look, Pam,... it's as if we are standing at the Nativity." There, in the light from the car's headlights was this family, and Keri holding the baby in a soft, warm blanket. The baby's mother and father knelt, too, as if in prayer. Pam wrote that her heart went back to when grace first appeared in Jesus' birth, that place of star shine and angel song and God's clear call: "Come, lay your gifts before my child." She and David offered what they had: clothes, blankets, and a few loaves of bread (Daily Guideposts, 2009, p. 354). For Pam and her family, the grace of God has appeared again.

Tonight, we sing with glorious celebration that our waiting is over. For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all humanity. We should be dancing all over the house tonight and tomorrow! The sheer joy is ours, especially because what we've waited for has come to pass. The Messiah is born!

And I tell you the truth... the sheer joy was mine when I was growing up because lo and behold, more than a year later, I couldn't believe it! Someone brought our dog, Lindy, back to us! She recognized us immediately. We hardly recognized her—she was very thin, her fur was all matted and knotted, but it didn't matter. The waiting was over! The sheer joy of having our dog return was unbelievable! My sister and brothers and I were dancing all over the house!

May the sheer joy of the appearance of God's grace which brings salvation to all cause you to dance all over the house this Christmas. Amen.