

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
November 27, 2011
1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

Advent 1, Year B

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. As you have noticed, I have gotten into the habit of saying “grace and peace” as the closing of my letters, and this is where I got the idea. The phrase “grace and peace” appears in the letters of the New Testament. I figured if it was good enough for the letters in holy scripture, it was good enough for mine. I’ve gotten fond of it over the years. It reminds me that even while we each have our imperfections and weaknesses, God gives us grace. It reminds me that even while we live in an imperfect world, God gives us peace.

And happy new year to you. Today’s reading from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is a wonderful reading for the first day of Advent. It leads us into the paradox that is the essence of Advent: Advent is the time of the “Now and the Not Yet”; Advent is the time that emphasizes that Christ is coming, while also affirming that Christ is here. Listen to the ways that time converges in this passage, as past, present, and future flow together:

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched by him, in speech and knowledge of every kind just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

As we begin Advent, I have been reflecting on what the difference is between the kind of waiting that is full of hopeful expectation and the kind of waiting that is full of stress. This passage gets to the heart of it: the waiting that is full of hopeful expectation is the kind of waiting described here, which includes both a sense that you have everything you need already, while you also have a sense that even better things are coming. That’s the

hopeful waiting: you have everything you need already, while you also have a sense that even better things are coming.

The Church season of Advent has been around a lot longer than the American holiday of Thanksgiving, but they turn out to be a nice combination: we give thanks to God for what we already have while we wait for even better things to come.

Paul begins this passage by saying “grace to you” and then right afterwards says “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you.” Paul wishes them grace for the future and then thanks God for them because God has already given them grace. It is a blessing and a thanksgiving all rolled into one, a hope for the future and a gratitude for the past and the present.

There is a sense of abundance here and completeness: “in every way you have been enriched by [Christ Jesus], in speech and knowledge of every kind just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is that beautiful paradox again, that yes, they are waiting for the revealing of Christ, and at the same time they have already been enriched in every way, they are not lacking in any spiritual gift as they wait. That’s what makes the difference between hopeful waiting and impatient waiting.

In the impatient waiting, we have a sense that we don’t have what we need, and so we can’t be happy now. It is a sense that we don’t have what we need so we can’t be happy until----until we get more money, until our spouse stops annoying us, until our kids learn a sense of responsibility, until we get our errands done, until this transition is over with, until other people learn some common sense, whatever. We are impatient because we think that we cannot possibly be happy until then.

But is that true? I saw a quote from a monk [Thich Nhat Hanh] who said, “So many conditions of happiness are available—more than enough for you to be happy right now. You don’t have to run into the future to get more.” And it’s true. Right now, I have everything I need. I am warm and fed. I am sheltered. I am loved. The sky is beautiful. God is present. And in my gratitude for the gifts of God right at this moment, I discover grace and peace.

My mind does go skittering off chasing after its anxieties about the future. Oddly enough, the peace I think I will find when every possible future problem is solved, is peace that exists for me now in the present moment.

I'm certainly not going to try to claim I've achieved some kind of spiritual perfection. It's comforting to know that I don't have to achieve spiritual perfection. That's why God invented grace. In fact, I can't wrap my limited human brain around what it would be like to see God face to face, or what it would be like for Jesus to come again, or what it would be like to have the Almighty revealed to me. For now, the sense that God is present in ways that I am not fully aware of is already a sense of peace, and a sense of hope that there is more to God than I can see now. And so it's good to wait, and to watch for God.

Blessedly for us, God has set up the universe so we don't get bored while we're waiting. God has given us plenty to keep us busy while we wait. Like the master who goes on a long journey and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, God has given each of us work to do. As one of the thanksgiving prayers in our prayer book says, "we thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts." It's a funny prayer, but also a sound one. We have plenty of neighbors to love, and we have God to love. We've got a wide variety of ways of doing that love work: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, visiting the lonely, encouraging the fearful, welcoming the stranger. We have plenty of things to thank God for, plenty of hymns to sing, plenty of connections to make. We have plenty of gifts from God to receive, and more keep arriving at our doorstep. If we have an overabundance of them, we can always pass them along to others: Grace to you, and peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.