

An Invitation of Grace
Genesis 3:20-21, 4:8-16

A man from the North stopped at a restaurant in the South for breakfast. He ordered two eggs, an order of bacon, some toast, and some hash browns. In due time, the order arrived. Two eggs, bacon, toast, and hash browns, but also grits. He alerted the server: I did not order any grits, not even one grit, in fact.

She replied, you don't have to order grits. Grits just come. Why, just because.

And grace is like that. As we prepare to begin our Irresistible Invitation study, our study is most profoundly an invitation to respond to God's grace. Which I should probably define a little more carefully.

The author of our study, Maxie Dunnam, describes grace like this: Grace is God acting in our lives to accomplish, with our willing response and participation, what we cannot accomplish on our own. OK, such as. . . Well, salvation is from grace. We can't accomplish that by ourselves. New life in God. . . that's also grace, because God chases us, we don't have to chase Him.

And, to go even further: grace is an undeserved gift and it is always a gift of love. We don't earn it. We don't even deserve it. God offers it because, well, because God is like that.

And as we peruse our hymnal, we find so many ways this notion of grace is described, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Amazing. Marvelous. "There's mercy with the Lord." "He'll go with me, all the way."

“O let the Son of God enfold you with his Spirit and his love.” “Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me.” “Because he lives, I can face tomorrow.” “Grace that is greater than all our sin” “O victory in Jesus, my Savior forever. He sought me and bought me with his redeeming blood.” “I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene, and wonder how he could love me, a sinner, condemned, unclean.” Well, you get the point.

Now some things for us to consider about grace. To begin with, grace is hardly mentioned, if at all, by name in the Old Testament, but the concept is there nevertheless. And as we begin in Genesis we notice something: Had we read the first chapter, we find

Creation itself is a gift from God. A blessing. Something good. Wondrous. Magnificent. Mysterious. Other creation stories from other cultures thought otherwise. Some saw humanity as caught in a crossfire between two sets of Gods. Gods cared about power and about each other and winning battles and if humanity got caught up in floods and such, well, so what, the Gods couldn't care less about us. People weren't important. Other cultures saw the earth as having been created by a sort of minor league God, one not ready for prime time.

But the Christian God, our God, the God revealed in Old and New Testament is revealed as one who creates creation to be a blessing.

But notice: when we fail to obey God, our lives become worse than they need to be. It's the story of Adam and Eve, they lose Eden, which was as much a spiritual place of perfect harmony with God as it was a physical place: they lose Eden because they are disobedient to God.

And then Cain loses his place among his own people and is sent off into exile, because he disobeys God and

murders his brother Abel.

Sin has consequences. Grace cannot keep us from the consequences of our sin. And, if you think about it, this is actually a gift, for if sin did not have negative consequences, then how would we ever grow spiritually beyond sin?

Sin has consequences. Yet, then notice this, it is God's grace that keeps us from paying the full, deserved, consequence of our sin. Sin leads to consequences, but sin never leads us beyond God's care.

God always offers us a new life, a new choice, a new blessing, no matter how deep in our sin we might be.

So, Adam and Eve deservedly lose Eden, but God does not discard them. When they must travel into the wild wilderness of gnats and lions and flood and cold, God himself makes them garments, that they might be protected. Fig leaves were enough in Eden when it was 75 degrees and sunny, but not so good when it's fifteen degrees and the wolves are howling all about.

The clothing of animal skins are a gift. Grace. Because God loves us more than he hates our sin. And what Cain does is inexcusable and horrific and cynical. So when he is asked, where is your brother and he answers, "Am I my brother's keeper?" the answer should have been yes. But Cain has chosen the route of sin. To murder his brother rather than to keep him in relationship.

So Cain is banished. But. But. God puts a mark on him so that when he is sent far from his own people, and among people who would want to do him harm, God offers his protection.

For Adam and Eve and Cain, because of their sin, their lives are not as good as they could have been. And they pay a great price for their sin. Yet, God does not utterly abandon them to their sin.

God is going to be with humanity in its new journey outside the Garden. And his relationship will be defined most profoundly as a one of grace.

Perhaps the most gracious book of all is Jonah.

Jonah is sinful and disobedient: told to preach to Nineveh, he heads off in the opposite direction. Disobeys God. Deserves to die. But is rescued by a fish sent by God.

So he preaches, preaches a delicious sermon about how God is going to punish the Ninevites, destroy them utterly. But then, to Jonah's dismay, the people repent. God spares them. They are Israel's enemies, but not God's enemies.

At which Jonah is beside himself: he throws a tantrum, wants to die. And complains to God, *That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.* And Jonah certainly doesn't want to serve a God like that. . . and the funny part is, it is simply because God is like that that Jonah is alive to fuss. It is nothing but God's mercy that has kept Jonah from being fish food.

Mercy. Slow to anger. Abounding in Steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing. These are all concepts that

we will come to define, when we get to the New Testament, as grace.

Well, so what? Well, if our study is called irresistible invitation, an invitation calls for a response.

Today, I want you to understand God, this creator God, who created rocks and trees and heaven and stars and you and me is a God who desires to be understood most profoundly as a Grace-giving God.

Do not be scared to trust in God. God wants what is best for you. In every situation, trust that God is with you. God does not always magically whisk our problems away, but he is steadfast in the midst of our problems. And if we have sinned, sinned grievously, trust that God still invites you to live in relationship with him.

Romans 3 tells us that we since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; we are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. There it is again, that word, grace.

At the same time, realize that God loves you too much for you to persist in sinful ways. We all have areas in our lives that have not been given fully over to God's grace-filled love for us. Maybe it's a relationship. Maybe it's our money. Maybe we're too selfish, too self-absorbed. Maybe we're too caught up in the things of life that rust and break, instead of the values that ennoble us and endure.

No matter. What I want you to remember is this: God invites you to a new way of living. His way. A way that gratefully accepts his gracious love and joyfully shares it with others in the giving of our time, our energy, our financial resources, and our hearts. A way best discovered in looking at God's best gift, Jesus Christ, he who

spoke of prodigal sons being welcomed home, of stray sheep being gathered in the shepherds' arms, of loving enemies, and of devoted obedience, even when that obedience meant sacrifice, ultimate sacrifice.

Our secular world regards Christian values as quaint, foolish, and out-dated. Some of our Christian brothers and sisters define God as vengeful, frightening and our world as God-forsaken.

Other Christians are like modern Adams, seeking to hide from God, lest he discover who we really are.

But guess what? There's no hiding from God. He knows your sin, your faults, your failings. And he loves you anyway. May we in this congregation proclaim in word and actions this understanding of God, God of creation, God of glory defined most powerfully as God of grace.

Will you accept his invitation to accept his grace for yourself and to share this grace in extravagant ways with the world around us?

This is how our journey of Invitation begins. Amen.