

Justified by Grace

So last week I talked about how scary God is. Do you remember? How when the Israelites began gathering at the foot of Mt. Sinai to receive God's law, there was thunder and lightning, and the mountain was smoking, and trumpets were blaring. And the people thought that if they came any closer, they would be killed. Moses said to them "Do not be afraid." Right, Moses!

And now today we just heard the Apostle Paul talking about the "wrath of God." That phrase makes me tremble right along with the Israelites. Not just the "minor annoyance of God," or the "disappointment of God," or the "momentarily ticked off-ness" of God, but the wrath of God. As if explosive anger is part of God's very character. As if God is sitting there in heaven just waiting to blast anyone who even thinks about disobeying one of his commandments. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth." Thanks a lot, Paul. I mean, where is the gospel good news in that? No wonder so many people today don't like you.

The thing is, in order to understand Paul—and in order to understand grace—we have to know Paul's story. Because grace is a story.

Paul grew up in the geographical area known as Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, in the city of Tarsus, twelve miles from the Mediterranean Sea. Paul's parents were both Roman citizens, and therefore Paul was too. Boy, was he proud of his citizenship.

He was also proud of his education. He had studied in Jerusalem under the famous rabbi Gamaliel, in order to become a Pharisee, one of the experts and leaders of his beloved Jewish faith.

And then there was this Jesus. Who supposedly was also a Jew, and some even thought of him as a Rabbi, but everywhere he went it seemed he broke the Torah, the law. And he taught others to break the law. So when he ended up getting executed by the Roman Empire, Paul said, "Yeah! It serves him right!"

But then, after Jesus was out of the way, his followers went around doing the same things. So finally Paul said, "I'm not going to stand for this. I'm going to do something about it. I'm going to take matters into my own hands." And he began going around, personally arresting these "Jesus followers" and taking them to the Roman officials. Where many of them would end of being put to death. "Yeah! Serves them right!"

One day, Paul was traveling to the city of Damascus, in Syria, because he had heard there were some of these detestable Jesus followers there. And as he was on the road, "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. (Sounds like the transfiguration!) He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul (which was his name in Hebrew) why do you persecute me? He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." At which point Paul probably thought he was toast. But the voice continued: "But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. So those who were with him had to take him by the hand and literally lead him into the city. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank." But for those three day, he surely did a lot of thinking.

Then a man named Ananias came to him, placed both his hands on Paul's head and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength."

Saul—Paul—became a completely different person that day. It's as if he heart had been completely emptied of his anger and arrogance and pride and had instead been filled with love. And from that day on, he began traveling around again, this time teaching people about Jesus. That he truly was the Son of God. And you know what else he taught people? He taught them about grace.

Which brings us to Paul's letter to the new believers in Rome. Some of them are Jews, and some are Gentiles. And in the first half of the letter he's basically telling them that they—and we assume we—are all hopeless sinners. Gee, thanks Paul. (Like I said, no wonder so many people today don't like you!)

"God has made known his will to us," he said specifically to the Jews. "In the Torah. Given to the Jewish people. Which would seem to suggest that we Jews are better than Gentiles. But we're not. We are all sinners." What Paul doesn't say, at least not here in these verses, not explicitly, is, "I ought to know, because I am the biggest sinner of all. I used to persecute Jesus Christ, the very Son of God. But Jesus himself came to me, transfigured, in a bright light from heaven. And he forgave me. For all the evil I had done. For everything. And after forgiving me, he called me—me!—to proclaim his good news, his gospel, to Jew and Gentile alike.

"We all fall short of the glory of God. We all break God's Torah, over and over and over. We can't help it. We all are deserving of God's wrath (and I know you don't like that word). But instead, God has given us his love. God has given us his forgiveness. God has called us—all of us, Jew and Gentile and everyone else—to a new relationship with him, a new covenant."

And then Paul pulls out a word, a special word that he uses to symbolize this love and forgiveness and new relationship. It's the word "grace." *Charis*, in Greek. Verse 23: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are all now justified by God's grace, as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Justified by God's grace. I've always kind of stumbled over that word "justified"; but it's really very simple. To be justified means to be made "right" with God. To be restored to full covenant relationship. And, it's a gift to us. A free gift. There is nothing we can do to earn God's love and forgiveness. No amount of righteous obedience. No animal sacrifices in the temple. Not any more. God freely gives it to us. "I ought to know," Paul is saying. "Because he gave it to me. And in response to this free gift" (Paul will eventually say, in Chapter 12, after he feels he has sufficiently made his point), God wants us to love him in return. And, to love one another. Which was actually what the law was all about.

I think we're ready to add some new "shades of grace" to our list.

#19, Grace is a gift.

#20, Grace cannot be earned or purchased, it can only be received.

#21, Grace restores us to right relationship with God.

#22, Grace was made possible, in part, by Jesus' sacrificial death.

In other words, #23, Grace is simply God's redeeming love.

Next Sunday is the First Sunday of Lent, and so we will return to the lectionary in our worship services and sermons. I hope to return sometime to this sermon series on grace, maybe after Easter.

For now, let's review all the shades of grace we've discovered so far:

From Part 1 (when we talked about the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel): Grace is a story. Grace is a relationship. Grace is a prayer. Grace wrestles with us. Grace gives us a new name. Grace is the face of God. Grace leaves us with a limp. Grace is a monument, asking us to remember. Grace tells us, "that's enough."

Part 2 (which was the story of Joseph and his brothers): Grace is forgiveness. Grace shows us that our strengths and our weaknesses are often two sides of the same coin. Grace helps us see with new eyes. Grace is expressed through tears. Grace sometimes takes a while. Grace helps us reframe the past. Grace brings us from the pit back to the pinnacle.

Part 3 (the story of God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai): Grace always comes first. Grace liberates us, or sets us free.

And Part 4 (the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, and his letter to the churches in Rome): Grace is a gift. Grace cannot be earned or purchased; it can only be received. Grace restores us to right relationship with God. Grace was made possible in part of Jesus' sacrificial death. Grace is God's redeeming love.

Please listen as we sing the hymn of response, "I Know Not Why God's Wondrous Grace" (VT 590)