

“Grace Upon Grace”

John 1: 1-18

Rev. Dr. Andrew L. McDonald

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Epiphany of the Lord

Great pieces of opera, many great theatrical pieces, even big movies have an overture. The overture gives an introduction that weaves together strands of the story, theme, narrative and atmosphere of the whole. The gospel of John has an overture, known as John 1: 1-18. We will look at that overture today.

It was in one of our Bible study classes. During the discussion, one of the members asked the simplest question: “Why religion?” Sometimes the simplest questions are the best. Musician Bob Dylan gave a profound answer in one of his songs:

*“You may be Ambassador to England or France,
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance,
You may be a heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.*

*You may like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk,
you might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk,
You might like to eat caviar, you might like to eat bread,
You may be sleeping on the floor, or sleeping on a king size bed.*

*But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes
Indeed, you’re gonna have to serve somebody.
Well it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord,
but you’re going to have to serve somebody.*

Why religion? You’re gonna have to serve somebody. Life has to have a purpose. You have to have a reason to get up in the morning. You have to have a purpose. Everybody serves the purpose that motivates their life. So what is it that you serve? What is your purpose for living? Is it your job? Your ego? Your country? Any of those will frustrate you and go against your values sooner or later.

Education can be helpful, but is fragmented, partial. Doing good in the world: that will exhaust you, and for whose good? Why? Come up with your own philosophy: other people will not agree with you, so what are you going to do then? You’re gonna have to serve somebody. Why religion? The world’s great religions seek to answer the question of the meaning of life. To integrate values and experiences in ways that bring order and peace.

How successful any given religion is is based on what its pragmatic outcomes are. Does it give unity to the self and unity to the community? Does it provide a coherent narrative that works for peace in the self and in the world?

That brings us to the Gospel of John. As late, the sometimes maligned Gospel of John. I am on a quest to recapture the meaning of John that I think many are missing.

John is criticized as being exclusive. I've addressed that in a couple of sermons before. Let's add a little more substance to that claim. If John is exclusive to other religions, then why does he use some of the terminology of other religions in his overture?

Rather, John is in dialogue with these other religions. He uses some of their terms to stretch our minds, and make us think differently. He does not repeat what they mean, but gives it his own theological twist.

John is not abstract philosophical theology. John is confession. John is saying: This is our experience.

John talks about two different spheres of experience: The eternal, beyond time, and the temporal, in time. The cosmic universal, and the covenantal, particular. The Word and the world.

And in this poem that begins his overture, He weaves these differences into a unity. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The Word preexists the world, but the Word will not stay out of the world.

The Eternal – that overarching reality which matters most –

■ the reality that is alone worth serving --

Has entered into time, history, creation.

The big question of John is not, "Does God exist?"

Because everybody has to serve some sort of god.

The big question is: "What does God look like?"

He begins to answer: "In him was life."

God brings about a quality of existence: filled with life.

"Through him all things came into being" (positive statement)

Without him nothing came into that has being" (negative)

Which is to say: everything that exists came from God.

Every people that exists came from God.

There is no dark side to the force.

There is no evil incarnate.

There are no mistakes out there.

There are no enemies that are totally, by nature evil.
So there is a hope and a goodness to creation.
This is an image of profound worldwide unity.
“In him was light, and the light was the life of all people.”

Light raises the question:

The word has spoken the good creation into being:

The question is: DO you see it?

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it, also translates, and the darkness has not understood it.

There may be people who disagree. It is not that they are evil. It is that they do not understand. There is a very different orientation if you are facing someone who is the embodiment of evil. We all know, you must destroy evil. As opposed to saying, that person who is seen as enemy, is in fact someone who does not understand. You don't have to kill someone who does not understand. You try to help them come to understanding. You try to help them see.

John is not about an exclusive religion that must destroy its enemies. John is about a religion that tries to help bring people to life, and help them to see. To see the fullness of life.

John is profound in that the language he uses is fluid: It shifts: Word, world, light, life. It is poetic: trying to help people come to see. Like an optometrist trying on different lenses. Do you see it now? Is this lens clearer, or is this lens?

The word became flesh: The eternal becomes temporal. God, who cannot be seen, is all of a sudden made visible in a human form. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us: Dwelt among us: also translated: Tented, tabernacle among us comes from the Hebrew story of God speaking to Moses in a tent. This presence now becomes visible to us in this one who is tenting (notice the dynamic imagery).

And we have seen his glory: Glory. Nicholas Wolterdorf: Defines glory: Radiant excellence. The manifest presence of God is described as radiant excellence.

What does this radiant excellence look like?> How is God visible? What do we see?

He comes to us full of grace and truth. We have seen his glory, for we have received grace upon grace. John hits the crescendo here. He is hopping up and down and saying:
This is it! This is our experience. Not just my experience. This is the experience of my whole church. We have experienced the glory of God in the radiant excellence of Grace! Grace upon grace upon grace!

Grace is the spontaneous, overwhelming, overflowing love that God radiates toward humanity. Unprovoked God gives this grace to an undeserving humanity. And the light of that radiant grace evokes something in us: faith. Faith in this God, who looks like grace. Of all the things that are worth serving, worth spending our lives on, this God of grace is worth more than anything else.

This is what is most REAL. When we recognize it, when we truly see it, it transforms us. We feel God's freedom to love. And it changes us. We have received grace upon grace. And it shapes us to be a people of grace.

This overture is not abstract theological ponderings. It is the poetry of the church: a church made up of people who have been overwhelmed by the grace that multiplies in their experience that life is made powerfully new in the light of Jesus. TO see him is like seeing God. The radiant excellence of the freedom to love without fear, without bounds, without exception.

When grace dances, get up and dance. Grace in the face of Jesus. Grace in the faces of the church. The overwhelming, superabundant, liberated and life-giving grace that keeps multiplying in the faithful.

Grace: who has profoundly sacrificed their time, money, their emotional peace, their good for you? You did not deserve it, did you? But they did it anyway. That's grace.

Who has forgiven you for what you did to them? You really stuck it to them. Maybe you really ignored them. You did not deserve that forgiveness, did you? But they forgave you anyway. That's grace.

Who has taken the heat for you, when you should have been held accountable? You should have paid the price for that. But they paid the price for you, with love. That's grace.

Where has there been destruction in the world. And it would have been so easy to keep that ball of destruction rolling. You would have kept it rolling, wouldn't you? But someone put themselves on the line, and stood up, and worked for peace and justice to change the world. They pushed themselves, they risked themselves. That's grace.

Who has been a healer for you? When you were in sad shape. They had no stake in your game. But they reached out, they cared for you, they cared about you. You did not deserve it, did you? But they reached out, and they healed you. That's grace.

The church is about seeing this grace all around us. And seeing it for what it is – a sign of the presence of God. And the church is about expanding the grace.

You've got to serve someone. We gather to experience the grace of God that is at the heart of what is most real, what matters most is that grace that we know in Jesus Christ. We see that grace. We want to share that grace to inspire one another to become those people of Christ.

Who celebrate again and again and again? Grace upon grace, Grace upon grace. God's grace. May we live in, and share, the grace of Jesus Christ, the Lord whom we serve. Amen.

Sources:

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