

## Sola Gratia

### An Opening Hymn – Amazing Grace

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch; like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed!

The Lord hath promised good to me,  
His word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be  
As long as life endures.

When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise.  
Than when we first begun.

### The Sermon – *Sola Gratia*

We have now sung “Amazing Grace,” that extraordinary hymn written by John Newton.

What a wonderful first course, because the title of this sermon is *Sola Gratia*.

Which means...

By Grace Alone...

Only By Grace.

By Grace alone have we been saved.

I'm going to do us all a favor, before the main course, and begin by telling you some of what might help us on our way through this sermon.

I'll offer to you two of the main ingredients up front.

First,

*Sola Gratia* is one of the three primary tenets of the Protestant Reformation, the Reformation of Calvin and Luther of which we are a part.

The other two principles are:

- *Sola Scriptura* and
- *Sola Fide*
  
- “Only through Scripture”
- “Only by Faith”

Keep these in mind. They will season the sermon.

And hold fast to the main ingredient, *Sola Gratia*-

By Grace Alone —

This is the foundation upon which all else, including our salvation, rests. It is, therefore, important.

By Grace Alone

- Not by works or anything we can accomplish.
- Not by reverence for the Word of God, however devoted.
- Not even by the perfection of our Faith.

Not by the perfection of any of these good and worthy actions do we merit salvation. Salvation comes only through the GRACE of God.

Also, coming to us from a more liturgical and catholic tradition, is this unique Fourth Sunday in Lent.

This is *Laetare* Sunday, the Sunday in Lent which calls us to come together; to come together to rejoice.

*"Laetare Jerusalem: et conventum facite omnes qui diligitis eam: gaudete cum laetitia."*

"Rejoice, O Jerusalem: and come together all you that love her: rejoice with joy.

“Come together, rejoice!”

That is language from the introit for today’s Latin Mass.

Come together all ye that love Jerusalem and rejoice.

This Sunday has other names.

- *Gaudete* Sunday – A Sunday for JOY
- Refreshment Sunday – A Sunday to leave the disciplines of Lent behind.
- Rose Sunday – Perhaps because the red of Lent is washed with the white colors of Joy and Celebration.
- “Mothering” Sunday – A Sunday on which mothers were honored. A Sunday servants had time off so that they could go visit their mothers!

Above all this is a Sunday in Lent when we can leave Lent behind.

Yes, eat chocolate today.

And Rejoice!

As I reflected on GRACE and JOY, the penny dropped, and I decided that it will be Amazing Grace which shall be our JOY today. This we shall, as it were, “taste and see” what happens.

So...

Honoring the Reformation principle, *Sola Scriptura*, we shall explore our Grace and our Joy by taking a Scriptural journey through today’s texts.

Hopefully we will not be entering into a wilderness of SNAKES!

We will let the texts lead us to GRACE.

But we will find that they also pose a serious challenge to our FAITH.

They will challenge *Sola fide* on the way to *Sola gratia*.

So off we go...

As an aside, there was once a college professor who would say,

“It is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer...”

And then proceed to offer information totally unintelligible to all.\!

But we will see, and see clearly the challenge and promise of this morning’s Scripture.

First, there are two stories, two texts that stand opposite each other; Numbers and John’s Gospel.

They face each other as if they were the outside panels of a glorious reredos, a wondrous iconic triptych.

- Numbers, with its wilderness of snakes, stands on the left.
- John, Jesus and the nighttime Nicodemus conversation, stands on the right.

They challenge each other and they challenge us. We shall see. Together, they challenge FAITH.

What about the centerpiece? And in the center, wonderfully, we have Ephesians and the promise of GRACE.

- Numbers, Moses, and the lifting up upon the stake of a crucified snake.
- “Look at this,” Moses commands, “And be saved.”
  
- Jesus, and the promised crucifixion upon the stake of the Son of God.
- Look at this?

Two crucifixions; they present the challenge on our Sunday of JOY. They present a challenge because they are not quite the same.

This is important.

In Numbers - the “Whole Congregation,” so they are called, is staggering through the wilderness, rather like us?

- They are miserably unhappy with the food, the water and their prospects.
- They whine, ceaselessly and nastily, at their leaders, at Moses.
- They are now beset by poisonous serpents, terrifying and deadly.
- They are surely mortal, and will surely die, apparently a rather unpleasant death.

The similarity that this real and iconic event casts upon Good Friday is blatant.

- We, this congregation, live in a worldly wilderness.
- We too have our hardships and our miseries.
- We too are mortal.
- We too shall surely die.
- We too can be wildly uncertain of our prospects.

For them, “Look at the snake and be saved, healed. Look and live.”

We too are called to look upon Him on Friday. Look and live?

Here is my thought about all this “crucifying and looking upon.”

It was easier for them, than for us, I imagine, to obediently gaze upon that obscene dead snake and believe, because for them the crucifixion worked.

Easier For Them.

FAITH and LIFE are immediately restored.

Their redemption, their salvation, was instantaneous.

I am not sure that the Good Friday experience was that simple.

The redemption in the desert was obvious.

I'm not sure Easter was so immediately clear; what Jesus had done, I mean.

With the snakes...

The experience was...

- Visible
- Incarnate
- Fleshly
- Immediate
- Imminent
- Tangible
- In your hand – obvious!

The Resurrection – that lifting up?

- Not so much
- Not for so many
- Not so soon

Good Friday, Easter, is a New Covenant and a New Lifting Up.

The Resurrection is of a different order.

The Resurrection and its Grace transcend the here and now.

The Easter healing, the saving, is not necessarily obviously right here.

It is not so blatant.

It is not clearly clear that “All will be well.”

For us, healing is present, surely, but the new promise is promised eternally and always.

Consider, let Thomas be our guide.

He makes clear the difference between Old and New.

“I need to put my hand into the flesh! There is “Old Thomas” in all of us.

It may have been easier for them.

To have absolute FAITH.

The same, yet different

In the wilderness it was that serpent;

The grotesque bronzed body of the snake on that shaft.

Yet, ugly though it was, they beheld and were saved.

Good Friday is ours to behold.

We too are saved.

But is not the transcendent promise a bit harder?

- Harder to behold?
- Harder to hold in our hands?
- Harder to hold with absolute FAITH?
- Harder - In order to be saved?

This is that challenge I mentioned.

The challenge of *Scripture to Fide*.

The challenge to our FAITH.

Hear John 3:16 with care!

“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

“Whosoever Believeth”

- Is eternal life contingent?
- Is it contingent upon your FAITH?
- How faithful must we be and for how long?

Herein lies the potential stumbling block.

Their serpentine redemption required obedience.

GAZE and be saved.

Does ours demand belief? FAITH?

Must we look at the cross in FAITH with unshakable conviction have everlasting life?

What about that?

There are those who would say “Yes, salvation depends on the security of one’s faith. And this they speak in judgment that they might separate the saved from the all the rest.

The word's condemned and judgment are right there in John. But we need not only this Scripture, but all of Scripture. We move beyond these pre-resurrection and rather self-reflective words of Jesus. We move forward to the Resurrection promise and gaze upon Ephesians, the center panel of our triptych. GRACE.

The Good News of this Sunday of JOY is...

- Our salvation is NOT dependent upon the perfection of our FAITH.
- Our salvation is NOT dependent upon the perfection of our anything.

“By GRACE you are saved.” There it is. Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 5.

In the text, the editors have set this apart by little dashes.  
It stands alone, unmodified and uncontingent.

Therefore, all manner of things will be well.

Not our perfection but God's perfect love SAVES OUR SOULS.

We believe this and we rejoice in this.

And this truth bears with it a Cosmic sigh of relief,

- It is not the perfection of our faith that saves us.
- It is the perfection of God's love.
- Of this we can be blessedly sure.

We began with “Amazing Grace.”

I recall, from the evangelical bits of my seminary experience, other hymns.  
This is also a rather “Evangelical” sermon as well.  
“Evangelical,” a bearer of Good News.

We'll close with some “good news” hymns from that tradition; hymns which capture the JOY, the spectacular GRATITUDE, of the promised GRACE of this Sunday.

(And, no, I'm not going to sing them!)

From Fanny Crosby

“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!  
O what a foretaste of glory divine!  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.”

☞ *Sola Gratia* ☞

- We inherit salvation
- We are purchased by God
- We are born of His Spirit,
- We are washed in His blood.

This is powerful, and to us, unfamiliar imagery. Even more so this hymn written by William Cowper, companion of John Newton.

“There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel’s veins;  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.

Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood shall never lose its power  
Till all the ransomed church of God be saved, to sin no more.

E’er since, by faith, I saw the stream Thy flowing wounds supply,  
Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die.

When this poor lisping, stammering tongue lies silent in the grave.  
Then in a nobler, sweeter song, I’ll sing Thy power to save,

Lord, I believe Thou hast prepared, unworthy though I be,  
For me a blood bought free reward, a golden harp for me!

’Tis strung and tuned for endless years, and formed by power divine,  
To sound in God the Father’s ears no other name but Thine.”

Redeeming Love has been my theme.  
And shall be till I die.

AMEN

This sermon was preached on March 15, 2015 at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Cohasset, Massachusetts by the Rev. Deborah M. Woodward.

The texts were Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21