

“GRACE JUST COMES”

6 Easter
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Acts 10:46-47
Emmanuel Church

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Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Evangelical author Philip Yancey writes:

Jesus forgave a thief dangling on a cross, knowing full well the thief had converted out of plain fear. That thief would never study the Bible, never attend synagogue or church, and never make amends to those he had wronged. He simply said, “Jesus remember me,” and Jesus promised, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” It was another shocking reminder that grace does not depend on what we have done for God but rather what God has done for us.¹

Grace is frequently misunderstood, often with a kind of knee-jerk reaction by those who ought to know better. We can’t earn it. We can’t qualify for it. As Yancey indicates, Grace is God’s gift to us, whether we ask for it or not.

Grace is not something we pray for, not something we plan. It’s a surprise. An Episcopal priest friend of mine, Harry Pritchett, wrote a little ditty called “God is a surprise,” which he played on a ukulele back in the sing-along era. He sings about unexpected biblical stories. Especially good for the kiddies. Does anyone who *can* sing know the refrain?

Surprise, surprise,
God is a surprise, right before your eyes.
It’s baffling to the wise.
Surprise, surprise, God is a surprise.
Open up your eyes and see.

¹ Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When it Hurts/What's So Amazing About Grace?*

Moses was a murderer lying low in the countryside and tending sheep. Suddenly, God called him to go to Pharaoh and tell him to release all the Hebrew slaves and let them go back where they came from. Moses knew a dangerous mission when he saw one, doomed to failure. It took a long time, with a lot of drama, but eventually Pharaoh let the People go. By the grace of God, Moses led them, just them through the sea. God is a surprise.

The most devout of the Pharisees, Saul of Tarsus, was a persecutor, not a follower of Christ, but you know the story of his conversion, his arduous and faithful ministry, and martyrdom. God is a surprise. Grace.

The great theologian, Augustine, prayed to God, “Give me chastity ... but not yet.” The Oxford medievalist, literary critic, and agnostic C.S. Lewis became an adult convert to Christianity. A serious scholar, ironically his 7-volume Narnia fantasy series is what makes him famous today.

When I was an assistant at a parish in Charlotte, a job I very much liked, I was suddenly asked to leave, fired. Bizzy was pregnant. Jobs were scarce. We had few resources. But I started my next job the very day the pay checks from the old one stopped. We were in New Orleans, a very strange and wonderful place, in a parish that tested me and used my talents almost every single day. I learned a boatload, and we made lifelong friends. Grace.

Nobody wants to have a sick child, especially with a debilitating and eventually fatal disease. The day Andrew was diagnosed was the worst day of my life. I went every day to the office, closed the door, sat there, and cried. But he proved to be an amazing kid who gave our family a shared sense of purpose. By the time he died, he had touched many lives. We talk about him every day and will never forget him. God is a surprise. Grace.

What we receive—health, good minds, family, friends, vocations—are gifts from God. These things aren't earned. They aren't deserved, any more than the bad things that happen to us. What is the word? Luck? Karma? I prefer Grace. Grace just comes.

Some years back, I preached a sermon people often refer to, ask me about, suggest I preach again, etc. Four or five others including Shelby have used it, as she says, with my permission. Before I sound too puffed up, let me assure you it's the only sermon I've ever preached that's gotten such a

reaction. One out of two thousand over 48 years of preaching; now there's a batting average to be proud of.

The sermon hangs on a tale which, if you've had decent attendance and sometimes pay attention, you may well have heard before. I'll just tell the story this time. You figure out what it means.

The first time I drove through the South, over 50 years ago, I stopped for breakfast at a roadside diner. I sat at the counter and looked at the menu. When the waitress came over, I ordered scrambled eggs, bacon, home fries, orange juice, and coffee.

Ten minutes later, she set a plate down in front of me. On it were scrambled eggs, bacon, home fries, and some gloppy looking white stuff.

"What's this?" I asked, pointing at the white stuff.

"That's grits."

"I didn't order grits."

"You don't ORDER grits. Grits just comes."

Maybe that's why we've lived 46 years in the South: Grits.

Grits just comes.