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Lesson: John 1:1-18

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Today is the final day of Christmas. Day 12. Today you finally receive those twelve drummers drumming that you asked your true love to give you. Speaking broadly, we know that it has been more than twelve days that have been focused on the birth of Jesus. Since around the time of Thanksgiving, we've been alerted by the songs on the radio and the Muzak in the retail stores that it is all about baby Jesus. For some of us, it has been enough and we are ready to move on from this season. For others, we are still waiting to put away all the decorative reminders of Christ's birth.

So we gather on this last day of Christmas, perhaps to hear the story of his birth once more, but that is not what we get with our gospel lesson from John's gospel. No manger is to be mentioned. Mary, Joseph, and shepherds make no appearance. "Where is the birth?" we might be asking. The opening of John's gospel instead points to a different birth: one of the world being created through the Word of God. "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." Perhaps that message is the one we are supposed to ruminate on the final day of Christmas. That as we have spent weeks hearing about the birth of Jesus, we should take the final day of the Christmas season to ponder how Jesus Christ is our mother, the one through whom we -- and all things -- have come into being. "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him."

The world "did not 'know' him?" Other translations say "the world did not 'recognize' him," or even, "the world didn't even notice." In other words, Jesus has come and you missed him. "Missed him?" Our society has been inundated with messages and songs about Christ's birth for weeks; how could we have missed him? This passage forces us to ponder this question. Perhaps we saw Jesus, but did we recognize him? Were all those

reminders in recent weeks of his coming to this world simply a sentimental thought for us, or did it change everything? To be honest, the odds are that it didn't change everything in our lives. The nativity story -- with the shepherds, Mary, Joseph, and the baby -- isn't written in a way to make the reader say, "Wow... this changes everything!" John's gospel, however, is written that way. Today's passage from the first chapter of John's gospel opens the door for us to grasp how everything is indeed changed through Jesus Christ.

There is an interesting word that is highlighted in this passage, and that word is grace. We use that word a lot in church, and it is certainly a central component of how we understand God's relationship with us. So we probably aren't shocked when that word shows up. But did you know that the word grace almost never makes an appearance in the gospels? Most of the times when it is used in the New Testament, it is found in the letters of the apostle Paul. The one spot in the gospels where the word grace shines on the stage -- in its full theological gravity -- is this passage. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

That is what the child brings to this world: God's grace and God's truth. Those two words exemplify Jesus' ministry on this earth. Life on this earth is messy. There is a lot of good to be found in it, but there is a lot of bad to be found too. Often, it gets messy, because a good now might be rooted in a historic bad, or because we -- for some reason -- can't even agree on an objective reality. Jesus comes with the Truth that is sufficient for parsing the right from the wrong in our typically messy world and lives. Yet, more importantly, Jesus comes with the Grace that is sufficient to work through and to remedy the mess of our lives and our world.

It is more than we can comprehend, but we were never asked by God to comprehend this Grace and Truth. We are only asked to receive it. The Grace and Truth that Jesus brings

into this world is more than the sentimental comforts that we often find in the nativity story. Jesus teaches grace and truth. Jesus enacts grace and truth. Jesus embodies grace and truth. It is the purest sense of good news; that to a messed up world and to our messed up lives, God so loved the world that the only begotten Son was given to us. Given to us, not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Saved through his Grace and his Truth.

It is not hard to find examples of our messed up world. The continent of Australia has recently had a string of record-breaking hot days, and what are normally seasonal brush fires have become massive infernos that have consumed over 12 million acres... a size larger than Vermont and New Hampshire combined. The conservative estimate is that nearly half a billion vertebrate animals have been affected. It is a messed up world we live in.

With today being the twelfth day of Christmas, that means tomorrow is the Epiphany of our Lord, when we celebrate the Magi coming to visit Jesus. That has had me thinking. As tensions between the United States and Iran continue to escalate, I can't help but think of the Epiphany story. A widely held theory among biblical scholars is that the Magi who visited the young Jesus were of the Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrianism began in -- and is still rooted in -- modern day Iran. I share that only because whenever humanity has engaged in war, or at least when nations have approached war, messages that dehumanize the other side are inevitably heard.

Whatever transpires in the coming days or weeks, we will be bearers of one form of message or another. So as Christians, let the Epiphany story remind us now of the message that God always calls us to share: that all people -- American, Iranian -- all people in this world bear the image of God. Not one person, not one culture, not one religion is more deserving of God's image than others. No one is more deserving of God's mercy and steadfast love than any other. We don't deserve any of it, yet God sends Jesus to this messed up and messy world so that we all may be recipients of God's truth and grace. "And the

Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." It is grace-squared. Grace-cubed. Grace upon grace upon grace. From the fullness Christ's grace, this world receives grace upon grace.

When this world came into being through God's Word, it was grace. Life itself is a gift. Yet so often -- like Jesus wasn't known by this world -- we don't recognize the grace that surrounds and is within us. We don't even notice the grace. It is not an easy thing to readily pick up on, but the grace is there. The grace is seen in the efforts of communities like ours that are empowered to make this world less messy and more hospitable. The grace is felt when we bring the ministry of presence to someone who just needs some company. The grace is heard in the voices of those who share the message that this world can be a better place.

God's grace changes everything. We are not abandoned to the messes of this world. A redeemer comes: the Light of God. God's grace changes everything. Grace is everywhere. It abounds. God's grace will not be derailed. Grace is God's strong Word for this world. Grace is a blessing that just won't quit even when it is confronted by all the messiness that we humans conjure in this world. Though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. Amen.