

Sermon: Grace upon grace - January 17, 2021¹

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Scripture: Philippians 3:4b-14, John 1: 10-18

Good morning. It is so good to be with you today even as we are all locked down in our own homes.

The events of these days are weighing heavily on me and I've been finding it hard to concentrate, let alone write. But being inspired by all the creativity that is flourishing online, I thought I'd like to play a bit with the way I share my message with you today.

I've been mulling on the question of going wrong and how difficult it can be to correct course, and that has made me think of a hymn, an old favorite.

*"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."*

Wretch. That's a pretty strong term. Today, I would like to meditate on this idea of wretchedness.

My *Webster Dictionary* describes a wretch in two ways: the first, as a miserable person, one profoundly unhappy; the second, one sunk in vice or degradation; a base or vile person. It derives from the Anglo-Saxon word for exile or stranger, for who is more wretched than the one driven from home?

¹ This sermon was originally presented as a video which included the clips from the following Youtube videos:

- Dolly Parton, acapella "Amazing Grace" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ucWjH1mTdw>
- Obama Foundation, "Amazing grace: June 26, 2015 Pt 2" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idehHmvUNb8>
- Paramount Pictures, Movie clips "Spock's funeral Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan 7/8" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_8nY_LQL3w
- The Acappella Company, "Acappella "Amazing Grace Jam" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPBRvE2T_DM

Before Christmas, we spent many weeks considering the question “what is being revealed?” and we were challenged to face many uncomfortable truths that have been brought to the surface during these turbulent times. Perhaps you, like me, have been forced to confront what is disturbing, deeply disquieting; to see profound misery and to acknowledge the role that we have as a part of a system that allows this to happen.

So what is next? Where do we go from revelation? How long does it take to go from seeing what is wrong to doing something about it?

Last week, Pastor Michele introduced our new sermon series on Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Paul’s path is a dramatic one. In Acts, we first meet him in a horrifying scene. He watches in approval as an angry mob drags a follower of Jesus out of the Sanhedrin and stones him to death. Paul, also known as Saul, is a Pharisee and a zealous persecutor of those who follow Jesus. He goes from house to house, dragging out men and women and throwing them into prison. He is described as “breathing out murderous threats” against Jesus’ disciples. But God has other plans for him and pursues him. As Saul is on the road to Damascus, a vision of Jesus appears to him saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul is blinded and has to be led by the hand to Damascus. For three days, he fasts and prays to God. Ananias lays his hands upon him and Saul’s sight is restored; he is baptised.

In Acts 9, it says: “Immediately, he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon his name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” [Acts 9: 20-22]

But Paul increased in the strength of his faith. Over the next decades, he shared the story of Jesus and helped to establish communities of Jesus followers through Asia Minor and Europe.

*"'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 lyrics of the beloved hymn, Amazing Grace, were written in England in 1773 by an Anglican clergyman John Newton. You may be familiar with Newton's remarkable story. As a sailor, he lived a harsh life full of drunkenness and debauchery. He ridiculed religion, tried to desert, was caught and flogged, then lived starved and captive to a slave trader in West Africa.ⁱ

When he was rescued and finally making his return trip to England, his ship was caught in a terrible storm; men were washed overboard and the side of the ship was torn apart. He felt sure that he was soon to die and he wondered in fear: what if the words of scripture that he had mocked were really true? Were his sins too great to be forgiven? The storm finally cleared and he survived. For him, that became the hour he first believed. Newton would always look back on this day when he became a changed man.

Newton's surprising story has come to be well known. It is the subject of children's books, documentaries, a feature film, and a Broadway musical. What a wonderful story it makes, a slave-ship captain who has a dramatic shipboard conversion and lives to write one of the most beloved hymns of all time. At the end of his life, he helps to achieve the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire.

These facts are true. But the story bears some closer inspection. Because, the path from revelation to repentance, from repentance to restoration, was rather more complicated.

When the ship limped into dock four weeks later, John Newton walked into the first church he had been to since he was a child. He turned his life around and from that day on he vowed to give up...drinking, gambling, and blaspheming.

Wait, what? You're a captain of a ship that transports enslaved people. As you walk the deck, you must know that beneath your feet are hundreds of fellow human beings in utter

misery, chained in the most horrific conditions, many of whom will die before they even reach land. Those that survive this brutal journey, you deliver to lives of abject degradation. But God in God's infinite mercy delivers you from death, and what do you give up swearing? Really?

Oh, it is so easy isn't it, from our 21st century perspective to see the speck in our neighbour Newton's eye? Paul went from persecutor to evangelist in three short days. But perhaps for others of us, self-reckoning is the work of a lifetime. Our pastor Peter reminded us that the road to restoration is slow and immeasurably long, because it is a road that allows everyone to be included.

Newton was a small cog in a big machine, an entire empire whose economics depended on the enslavement and trafficking in human beings. Every spoon of sugar in their tea was implicated, every bolt of cotton woven in their mills, every tot of rum for the navy that ruled the waves. For Newton, sailing ships was the only job he knew how to do, and he was good at it. And so, for six years after his conversion, Newton continued in the slave trade, captaining ships carrying shiploads of Africans to their fate. But Newton continued to read the Bible and grow in faith. He prayed, wrote hymns, and organized church services for his sailors. But his understanding of what it meant to be a good Christian was that he and his sailors were to treat the enslaved people humanely.

After nearly twenty years at sea, Newton had to retire because of ill health. He found work as a customs official in Liverpool. There, he became inspired by Evangelical preachers and began to teach himself Greek, Hebrew and Syriac. Many asked to hear him speak about his dramatic conversion and in time, he felt a call to the ministry. He was ordained as an Anglican clergyman and made curate of a small church in the town of Olney, about 60 miles north of London.

During this time, he and his good friend, the poet William Cowper, wrote nearly 300 hymns. He set himself the goal of writing one hymn a week, to go with the theme of the sermon, and he wrote in a simple and direct language for the lace-makers, blacksmiths, and small

tradesmen of his parish. “Faith’s review and expectation,” what we now know as “Amazing Grace,” is the most autobiographical of his hymns. It was written almost 250 years ago for a New Year’s service in 1773.

But when he spoke of wretchedness from the pulpit, and when he calls himself a wretch in the hymn, he and his listeners would probably have understood that to mean his drunkenness, blaspheming, and immoral living. The enslavement of people was still not questioned by most Christians who argued that it was justified in the Bible. But in these years, enslaved and formerly-enslaved people were beginning to give powerful testimony to the evils of this institution through their words and their heroic resistance and they forced many people to face the truth of what was going on.

In time, Newton became the rector of St. Mary Woolnoth in London and he became friends with activists working to abolish slavery. It is probably only about three decades after his retirement from the slave trade, and 40 years after his dramatic conversion at sea that he began to wrestle with the question of slavery.

I am bound in conscience to take shame to myself by a public confession, which, however sincere, comes too late to prevent or repair the misery and mischief to which I have, formerly, been accessory. – John Newton

That is wretchedness isn’t it? The slow-dawning awareness of the wrongs we have committed, the harm that we have done that we can’t go back in time to undo, that we can’t make right no matter how hard we try. The awareness that we are implicated in structures perhaps not of our own creation but ones that cause great harm. And it makes me wonder, as we walk our decks, what it is that we too might be failing to see beneath our feet?

In 1788, Newton finally spoke publicly against the slave trade. He published a first-hand account in which he argued that slavery brutalized both the captive and the captor. He drew large congregations and influenced many. Newton’s young friend William Wilberforce, an up-and-coming Member of Parliament, came to him in a time of spiritual

crisis, having had experienced a religious conversion like Newton's, wondering whether he should leave politics to spread the gospel. Newton convinced Wilberforce to maintain his connections with the wealthy and powerful, and to serve God where he was. Wilberforce became one of the key champions for the abolition of slavery. Newton lived to see the passage of the 1807 act which abolished the slave trade in the British Empire.

What a striking end to the story. Only it isn't, of course. The British Empire stopped the transatlantic slave trade, but for another 3 decades, many people, backed by strong economic interests, continued to tell themselves that while of course it was immoral to capture, buy, and sell human beings, it was not wrong to keep the people who already were enslaved. For 800,000 enslaved people in the Caribbean, South Africa and a number in Canada, it would not be until 1833 that they were fully emancipated.ⁱⁱ And that of course was only the next step on a long road to racial justice.

The story of the hymn "Amazing Grace" now takes us to the southern part of the United States. The lyrics of this hymn were originally sung to several different tunes. Only in the early 19th century would it be set to the tune that we now associate with it, probably from a Scottish folk tune. This seems a wonderful match, the rise and fall of the melodic line echoing the emotions of Newton's words. It was originally written in shape note form so it could be learned and sung by ordinary people. It spread through the tent revivals of the American South.

"Amazing Grace" means many things to many people. It has been a song of solace in the time of grief, encouragement in a time of despair, celebration in a time of joy. The idea of wretchedness can speak as Newton intended, to the idea of sinfulness, but it can be understood as suffering.

"Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come"

It was claimed by African Americans, some who perhaps were descendants of the very people on John Newton's ships. For them, it served as a testimony to their experience of the dangers, toils and snares of their lives, and of their joyful expectation of deliverance from misery. It was sung for the Freedom Marchers in the Civil Rights era; by Jessye Norman at Wembley Stadium when Nelson Mandela was released; and at gatherings around the globe after September 11.

This hymn has only grown in popularity since 1970 when it crossed over from gospel to secular audiences. Judy Collins's 1970 recording became a popular hit. It has been recorded by everyone from Paul Robeson to Rod Stewart, from Elvis to Aretha, from Randy Travis to K.C. and the Sunshine Band. I confess to a weakness for the bagpipe versions, myself.

It was sung by a president, a great orator, who had spoken at so many memorial services for so many victims of gun violence that he was not sure he had any more words to offer. Amazing Grace has become a staple in funerals where it speaks of sorrow, comfort and hope, and if Gene Rodenberry's vision is anything to go by, perhaps it will still be with us in the 23rd century, as seen here when it somewhat incongruously sends off Star Trek's beloved Vulcan, Mr Spock.

Reading the epistles is a little like reading someone else's mail. As an historian, this is something I love to do. But to do it well, you have to understand the context, know who is saying what to whom and for what reason. As a body, these letters show Paul's wrestling with complex questions of how to follow Jesus in many new contexts he found himself in, when the solid foundation of law that had guided every detail his life as a pious Jew had fallen away, when this next generation of Jesus followers were left with trying to interpret stories passed along by mouth, of miracles and enigmatic parables and teachings.

The Epistle to the Philippians was written by Paul from prison to the community of Jesus followers in Philippi, a city in north-east Greece, probably around the year 62, about 10 years after Paul had first visited the city. The purpose of the passage we heard read today

was to warn against those who insisted that all followers of Jesus had to abide by Jewish law.

I think Paul's letters show a mind grappling with humanity's relationship with God. What is the path to right relations? Here, he is saying if you wanted to play the game of credentials, he could play it better than anyone having lived according to the Law with great zeal. In the end, all of these attempts to gain merit were in vain. But Paul urges his fellow Jesus followers not to be hampered by their awareness of their own wretchedness, but to rejoice in God's love and mercy. It is God's saving grace that will help them lead godly lives.

In Paul's great letters the words repentance and forgiveness appear several times. But the word grace appears over and over again. Grace upon grace. The word appears about a hundred times. Grace was at the heart of Paul's message.ⁱⁱⁱ

"Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

And Paul's message was central to John Newton's work and life. Newton had a sense that grace had protected him through numerous close brushes with death, and pursued him the many times he had gone astray. On his deathbed, he said "my memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things--that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior." Paul urged the Philippians to take heart: "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." [Philippians 3: 13b-14]

For me, this hymn speaks to the human condition, our painful awareness of the injury we cause, and our need for grace, that unearned mercy. And the story of the hymn reminds us that God works, even through our brokenness, to bring light, life, song, and blessings beyond anything we can ask or imagine. It is a song about the wretched exile being brought home.

AMEN

Questions for reflection:

1. How does your own experience of grace compare with that of John Newton?
2. Does his long path to recognizing his errors and changing course ring true to you?
And does it challenge you to wonder what wrongs you too might be failing to see?
3. Are there hymns that have been important to you and why?

Scripture

Philippians 3:4-14 (New International Version)

4 though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: **5** circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; **6** as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. **8** What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ **9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in^[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. **10** I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. **13** Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, **14** I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

John 1: 10-18 (RSV)

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. ¹¹ He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. ¹⁵ (John bore witness to him, and cried, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.’”) ¹⁶ And from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only Son,^[a] who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

ⁱ Much of this information comes from the well-researched book : Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: the story of America’s most beloved song* (Ecco, 2002). Helpful materials are also found at the Cowper and Newton Museum <https://cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk> and the John Newton project https://johnnewton.org/Groups/222559/The_John_Newton/new_menus/new_menus.aspx

ⁱⁱ Slavery was abolished in most British colonies in 1833; full emancipation did not take effect until 1838.

ⁱⁱⁱ Greg Herrick, <https://bible.org/seriespage/greeting-philippians-11-2>