Isaiah 7:10-17, John 1:14-18

“Christmas in May”

 I was speaking with a friend of mine yesterday who came to visit from Washington D.C. He was serving in Moscow as diplomat while we were there and he came up with his wife. We were talking about you. Were your ears burning? He said, how’s the church? And I said, you know, I love doing the most simple things, not doing anything too complex and it seems that the people get a lot out of it. I told him about how we read through the Bible and how going into it a lot of you were skeptical, why do we need to do this? What’s the purpose.

 And then I told him about those of you who didn’t want to stop reading, about the look on your faces once you walked out of the sanctuary after reading, about the handful of you who called me nearly in tears after reading how it had moved you so as you read about Isaac who was almost sacrificed, or Jesus being betrayed and the last supper.

 All we did was read the Bible. Nothing complicated. All we did was open ourselves to allow the Holy Spirit have an impact on our lives, and God took the opportunity to do just that. There is nothing complicated about being people of God, just allowing God to work on us and getting out of the way to allow God to do the work.

 Our Scriptures today deal with a single world: grace. I don’t believe I’ve ever preached a sermon focusing just on that one word. How is it possible that in nearly 20 years of ministry I don’t remember preaching a sermon on this topic of grace? We find the birth of grace in our Lord Jesus Christ in our continued slow but methodical journey through John. We find in Isaiah the prophet speaks of that birth of grace coming into the world. Now traditionally both of these verses are saved for readings around Christmas.

 But what we find is that grace is absolutely at the center of Scripture not only at the birth of our Savior, but at every stage of His life. And if grace is at the center of our Scripture, if it makes Jesus Jesus, if it is a pillar of our theology, then it has to be at the center of our lives. Let’s hear about grace as told in the Christmas story according to John.

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I need to warn you this Sunday that I’m not going to have a whole slew of stories to pepper my sermon to keep you awake. If its stories you are looking for today you may as well check out now. Today you are going to have to imagine that you are in a classroom learning about a single topic, that topic is grace. Then you won’t have your expectations dashed.

 So what is grace? It is a term that finds itself used most frequently in the New Testament and it is fully developed in the New Testament, then we will see what it means in that context. It comes from the Greek root charis. From charis we get our English word – charismatic. Now, this term has its own negative connotations. In religious circles it normally means those who speak in tongues and rely heavily on so called works of the Holy Spirit. Not always a real positive feeling especially within the Presbyterian church.

 We also have the English a person who has charisma is someone who is likeable, a good speaker, and someone who tends to be a leader as well. This modern understanding of the Greek charis and its words that are derivatives can get in the way of what it really defines in the New Testament. Charis in the New Testament refers less to what a person has, and more to what God gives and what God is able to do and create in people.

 The Gospel of John is a great place to discover and build a definition for grace in Scripture. It is mentioned three times in the entire Gospel of John, and as you can imagine those three times we already saw this morning. Did you hear the word Grace mentioned when it was read today? Let’s turn now to John and look at vs. 14. This verse is traditionally seen as the Christmas verse. The word becoming flesh is a physical description of the birth of baby Jesus in Bethlehem and laid in a manger. God came in the flesh as one of us. I love verse 14 because where it states lived among us the literal translation in the Greek is that God pitched a tent on the earth and refused to leave us alone.

 God’s grace was such that he came into this world to be one of us. He didn’t have to, no one forced him, but he wanted to act of his own loving kindness to be with us and be one of us. As a result, Christmas is about the birth of grace. In Jesus, the personification of grace is revealed. All of this points to a definition of grace that reveals a loving kindness given to us not because we deserved it, this is key here, but because God out of the love that he has for us, sent his only Son for us.

 Isaiah speaks directly about this. Ahaz is told by God to ask for a sign. Ahaz, God said, I want to do something special for you. Ask for anything you want and I’ll do it. Do you have kids that when you ask them what they want for Christmas or for their birthdays they are no help at all? Oh, whatever it doesn’t matter to me what you get. While other kids can whip out a list that’s a mile long. Ahaz didn’t want to tell God what he should do so God said, okay, a virgin shall bear a son, and when that happens you will receive my blessings far beyond your imagination. Jesus’ birth by Mary was the sign of God’s grace promised to us way back in Isaiah and played out in the little town of Bethlehem.

 All through Scripture we find a consistent desire of God to show favor to his people. That is grace, when the desire manifests itself on earth and in our lives, or Jesus, God himself, appeared on earth. Verse 14 tells us that Jesus came on this earth full of grace and truth. This is crucial to understanding what grace is. Jesus came into this world full of grace and truth.

 You know, if there is one accusation about the Presbyterian Church over time it is that it has preached too much about the grace of God and not enough about the truth of our present state as sinners. Jesus came on earth with both grace for all people and truth to guide and direct our lives along very basic common principles.

 The second time that grace is mentioned is in verse 16 where it states that from his fullness, Jesus’ fullness, we have all received grace upon grace. This is where the Presbyterian Church and its theology shines. I don’t normally lift up Presbyterian beliefs and brag about them, but I have to say that our Presbyterian doctrine of grace, what we believe about the grace of God absolutely rocks. I’m proud to be a Presbyterian because of it. From Jesus’ fullness. What does that mean? Fullness in this Scripture means literally a quantity that fills a space. We know that if you pump a gas or a liquid into any type of space or container it will completely fill that space. It will fill every nook and cranny of that space.

 Jesus came into this world, vs. 16 tells us, and as a result all of us have received grace upon grace. It permeates every nook and cranny of who we are. Do you hear me Presbyterians? If you call yourself Presbyterian then you believe that God has filled you with grace and you will view your neighbor as a person equally floating with grace. We should all be like helium balloons filled to the gills with grace. And we should view our neighbors as having that same grace.

 Some believe that we should see only those who follow certain laws, or make forced faith statements as being the only ones who have God’s grace. Verse 16 tells us that we have all received that fullness of grace. Then verse 17 lays it all out from the Old Testament covenant based up on the law, and works, and how we could earn our right position before God by the law of Moses, to what Jesus was able to bring when he came upon the earth, the incarnation of God.

 The law was given by Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus. Calvin stated, again a good Presbyterian, that grace was most perfectly seen through the shedding of Christ’s blood upon the cross. I know we are looking at Christmas as described in John 1:14, but isn’t it still Easter today? The grace of God is found in both the birth of our Savior and in his tragic death. Both of these actions were unsolicited, and certainly undeserved.

 Grace is a central tenet in all of Scripture but our receiving it, Paul reminds us, is completely God’s will. It has nothing to do with any of our actions that may make us think that we deserve it. So, if grace is at the center of the Gospel of John as we have seen by his stressing it 3 times in these verses, then it has to be at the center of our lives.

 Philip Yancey once said: I would much rather convey grace than explain it. I would much rather live by grace than talk about it. What does living by grace look like? I think Terry Roberts is going to reveal a lot to us this evening about living a life of grace. She may come and speak to us, but it really is the testimony of her life that I pray will have the most impact upon you.

 At the center of grace has to be the understanding that it is undeserved. We don’t deserve the grace that God gives to us. So why do we live our lives holding grace from people until they show us that they deserve it. Why are we the first to be involved in character assassination of someone, speak badly about someone in the community or in the church as a direct demonstration that they haven’t deserved our praise.

 We do this because this is how the world operates. A person makes a mistake, or is irresponsible then no grace for them until they can show me that they deserve to be treated differently. We should be on our knees right now praising God that he doesn’t treat us with the same grace we treat others. You see today in our society and culture grace is considered a weak concept. You show grace only if you’ve been already beaten. Jesus showed grace as the creator of all things, as the light of the world. Jesus humbled himself graciously, even to the point of death on a cross.

 There are times when we do recognize the grace of God. When our mom, or our husband or wife is lying on the hospital bed with tubes and electrodes coming out from all over their body. It is then, when we get really low, that we often experience God’s blessing the strongest because it is then that we recognize stronger than ever that we don’t deserve it. And that is the key to living by the grace of God. Knowing that you don’t deserve it, but God wants you to have his blessings and his favor anyway.

 It isn’t difficult for me to imagine what that would look in our own daily lives. Selfless individuals abound in this church. We have had quite a few people sick over these last few weeks and months and the grace and compassion that you have exhibited to these brothers and sisters in your visitation has been incredible.

 What would it look like as a grace filled church? Again, I can come up with an example pretty easily. This past Wednesday your session decided to expand our food bank and create one here in our church building and we will welcome those families within Strasburg on low and reduced lunch to pick up a food bag once a month. We will be encouraging you to take part in this as a whole congregation in donating food and probably beyond what you have been asked to donate in the past so that we can have a stocked food closet to feed those who stop by the church. I don’t know about you, but I’ve never left the church hungry and we don’t want anyone to say that they did.

 Now, we could have some people walk into this church, our church that have never been here before. It could happen. We could have some people who don’t really deserve a food bag from us and already get food from Lancaster or Quarriville come and get another bag from us.

 We could be reaching out to those that society feels are undeserving. After all, if they are poor they must be lazy. If they are broken they must be weak. If they are downtrodden then they are opportunists. They don’t deserve our food, we can’t be safe with them in our church. Well the session felt like this church, this congregation, that each one of us is a sign of God’s grace. You are an undeserved gift that we have received. How can we hold it back from others who have received this same undeserved grace?

 Grace is all about being open and giving to those who don’t deserve it. I pray that we will be overrun by those who don’t deserve what we have to offer. After all, we are also undeserving of all of God’s grace. Amen.