

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

January 3, 2010
2nd Sunday after Christmas
John 1:1-18

Glory, Grace and Truth

January 3, in the year of our Lord 2010. It seems hard to believe that it's been 10 years since Y2K struck fear in the hearts of many. January 3—the new year has started, and Christmas is, for all intents and purposes, over. In stores across the country, Valentine's Day is already the shopping theme. How many of you have taken down your Christmas trees and decorations already? Maybe you were surprised to see the poinsettias and nativity sets and tree still here in the church. This is the last Sunday, the last day to savor the Christmas feeling before heading into the new year.

Christmas is such an intense and full season that we don't always take time to reflect on what we've experienced. As we grow older, "was it a good Christmas?" starts to mean a lot more than "did you get good presents?" "Was it a good Christmas at First Presbyterian Church?" means to me, "Was our celebration of Christ's birth filled with joy and hope? Did we share good news of peace on earth, goodwill to all?" Did we open our doors and our hearts to those who were hungry for spiritual truth? Did we sing like the angels, worship like the shepherds and wise men, live faithfully like Joseph and ponder all these things in our hearts like Mary did?

There were close to 500 people here on Christmas Eve, between the three services. That's many more than we see on most Sunday mornings, and as I looked at those gathered, there were many, many faces I didn't recognize. We welcomed all. We invited them in. We engaged in a ministry of hospitality, a ministry which involves many more people than just the church staff and musicians and the few people who serve on the hospitality committee. The ministry of hospitality belongs to all who worship regularly here, and at no time are we called upon to engage in it more than on Christmas Eve..

Noted preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor observes that congregations, like individuals, have a natural gift for bringing certain words to life, what the gospel writer John calls making the word become flesh and live among us. Some congregations, she observes, are gifted at making the word "hospitality" real, while others are good at "prayer" or "service." So, she asks, when a visitor leaves a church service, what are the first words that come to mind? (*Feasting on the Word*, year C volume 1, pp. 191-192) What words became flesh in that worship experience? It's a good question for all year long, but one which I've been pondering with particular respect to our 3 Christmas Eve services. Once upon a time on a Christmas Eve I heard a minister bring to life the word "judgment." He looked at the crowds and said something like, "Hey, good to see you all. Why don't you come back on Sunday mornings?" It wasn't very hospitable or welcoming, was it? What I hope we made real on Christmas Eve is the mystery expressed in a single verse of scripture, beautiful yet abstract words which need to be enlivened to be truly understood. John 1:14 - "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." I believe that the words GLORY, GRACE and TRUTH were alive here on Christmas Eve.

I'll start with the biggest service, the 8 o'clock, in which GLORY shone brightest. The worship choir and the bell choir, violin, clarinet, trumpet, piano and organ created a

glorious celebration of Christ's coming into the world. We heard so much beautiful music that inspired strong carol singing and uplifted our sights to imagine choirs of angels praising God, singing "Glory to God in the highest!" The gorgeous decorations throughout the sanctuary--candles glowing, the vivid colors of the poinsettias, the lovely banners--surely these all communicated to visitors the love and care given to enhancing the everyday beauty of this place, to make it glorious. So to both the ear and the eye, glory was everywhere. In a world which can be terribly drab and dark, to experience glory is to glimpse the eternal, to pull back the veil which separates heaven and earth. The word GLORY became flesh among us, as God's glory was expressed and celebrated by ordinary human beings.

But glory is not all there is to Christmas nor to Christ. In the service which was a close second in size, the 5 o'clock, GRACE was alive. Nearly all the worship leaders in that service were under 18, with just a few adults standing behind and with them to help them shine. This was the service in which we made special efforts to be welcoming to children and their families, and the place was full of them. To welcome children requires an attitude of grace, not a desire for perfection. So instead of polished violinists, we had beginners who gracefully shared their joy in making music. Some of our teenagers who play in the band at school learned Christmas music to offer to God. And the youth who read the scriptures practiced well so that all could hear the story of Christmas. We had a real life baby Jesus--she was a girl, and her father Joseph wore glasses. We had 3 wise men, many angels, a star, but only 1 shepherd because we let the children choose their costumes. Several years ago we realized that adding a dress rehearsal to families' schedules in the frantic days right before Christmas just did not add to the grace and peace of the season, so we downgraded from a grand pageant to just inviting the costumed and uncostumed children to the front to see the baby. And they came, lots of them. Grace abounded in the 5:00 service, all were welcome, and every offering of worship was received with grace--even the voice of the 2-yr-old who sang the same words to all the Christmas carol tunes: "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." GRACE became flesh and lived among us.

Glory, grace and TRUTH. The 11 o'clock service was far less crowded, far more subdued. God's glory was here, but quieter. God's grace was present, a free gift of a place to worship to a nurse who had worked the evening shift, an elderly man who was baptized here as an infant and who attends every Christmas Eve, and several families with young adults who may have been at parties or dinners before the service but who wanted to finish their Christmas Eve in church, lighting a candle and pondering the mysteries. I think they all came to hear the TRUTH, to experience the reality of God's presence and to be reassured that God loves the whole world, and loves each one of us. The word was read and carols were sung, but the TRUTH became flesh among us in a communion meal. Ours is a material faith, for at Christmas we proclaim that it wasn't enough for God to be spiritual among us--no, God became flesh among us. We call that "incarnation," and to say that Jesus was divine and Jesus was born of a woman is our faith's radical affirmation that this world is loved and blessed and lived in by God. So we share ordinary bread and ordinary grape juice in a central act of worship, recognizing that they are transformed by faith to be symbols of Christ's presence with us. And the bread and juice are eaten by ordinary human beings, we who are in the process of being transformed into more holy and grace-filled beings who reflect our Savior and Lord. We are what we eat, after all. And our communion

meal, on Christmas Eve and today and every time we share it, embodies the TRUTH that we are the new body of Christ. We are becoming who God made us to be, and through Christ is making us to be—the children of God.

Glory, grace and truth—if we were gifted to be able to make those words come alive on Christmas Eve, what are we called to embody in these more ordinary times? Maybe we should stick with what we know we can do, and strive to live these powerful words more and more all year, so that each week every worshiper experiences glory and receives the fullness of Christ's grace and truth. Instead of trying to do or be everything, all things to all people, we could set as our goal these three words—glory, grace and truth—and pray for the gift of making one or more of these three words come alive in our midst every time we are together.

We could do worse. Most of us have experienced churches which embody mediocrity rather than glory, judgment rather than grace, or falsehood rather than truth without even thinking about it. And if we experience glory, grace and truth when we're together, then imagine what might be dispersed into the world when we go to our homes, our workplaces, our schools, our community. The world around us will be more glorious, more grace-filled, more full of the truth that is God's truth. We could do worse!

It's a new year, a time for new beginnings. As we put away the decorations and tread into the ordinariness of the months ahead, this year let's keep some of that Christmas glory out where we can see it all year long. Let's live with more grace in our lives, starting with our hospitality to strangers. And let's trust in the truth that Christ came to show us—that God loves all the world, and even us.

Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth, goodwill to all!