

## “Full of Grace and Truth”

John 1:1-18

January 4, 2008

Dr. Kipp Wolfe

It is good to be with you again this morning after having been gone last Sunday. I appreciate Carol preaching last Sunday. I love preaching, but it is good every once in a while to have some time away to rest and relax. I look forward to being back this morning, and especially to preach about this scripture. If I were to choose a handful of scriptures in the Bible, this one would be among my favorites.

As always on the first Sunday of a new year, I say congratulations to you for your perfect attendance in worship this year! I expected to see some of you. I not only expected to see some of you here this morning, because you are here nearly every Sunday, but I expected to see some of you sitting where you are sitting because some of you sit in about the same place most Sundays. I appreciate your commitment.

Some of you might have made a resolution to be in church nearly every Sunday if you possibly could. We could do worse in our resolutions. We start with a clean slate at the beginning of a new year, not a *blank* slate, for we have things on our slate from the past, but a *clean* slate. Those bad things from the past have been wiped clean for the new year.

Our scripture today addresses both beginnings and our need for forgiveness. Of all the reasons we might come this morning, our common need is for God’s forgiveness. Every one here who is aware enough and honest enough has some things in their past they wish weren’t there. We come with our common need for God’s forgiveness, seeking new beginnings.

This scripture could really stand a series of sermons because it is so rich and full. It is John’s Christmas story. There are no angels or shepherds or wise men, but it is John’s understanding of how God came into the world. Biblical scholars will tell us that the opening to John’s gospel might have been a hymn in the early church. I like to think that John might have sung this hymn in a faith community at one time in his life. Our communion hymn today is the most popular hymn in the church—*Amazing Grace*. I would like to think that this hymn was that popular, so John incorporated it in his introduction to his gospel.

The rabbis have a wonderful saying that goes like this: “We sing before we say.” In other words, much of what we learn about faith comes to us through hymns. I spoke to Mark Beckwith about this last week. Mark did not realize that this scripture had at one time been a hymn. We all know how important hymns and music are in the life of the church.

John approaches his understanding of God coming into the world by using a word that is known as *logos*, “The word became flesh and dwelt among us.” It is God’s understanding of what we call the incarnation. One of my favorite preachers and authors, Barbara Brown Taylor, has said this about God’s word,

“In Jesus, the Word is not a unit of speech. It is a way of life, a certain way of being that speaks louder than words. This Word does not deliver medical lectures to sick people; this Word heals them. This Word does not hand out neatly printed recipes to hungry people; this Word feeds them. This Word does not leave inspirational tracts lying on the bedside tables of those who are dying; this Word raises them from the dead.”

“The word became flesh.” Think about all the bad words you’ve ever heard, maybe words that someone called you as a child, or words that you called other children. Racial slurs, words that are used to pick out certain groups of people, words that are ugly, mean, I don’t have to say those words. You know those words, don’t you?

In the early church, there was a heresy. The heresy was this, Jesus wasn’t really a person. Jesus wasn’t really a human being. He just appeared to be a human being. Do you remember a few weeks ago in one of the Christmas sermons I talked about *Away in a Manger*—“The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes,” when the cattle were noisy. That was a heresy. Of course Jesus cried when he was a baby.

In response to this heresy, John used the word *flesh*, which was an ugly word to these people. In other words, Jesus didn’t just become “a good man,” he became FLESH. In flesh, he revealed to us what it means to be human. He revealed to us that God understands. God already understood, but now we *know* that God understands.

He revealed who God is. He revealed something important about the faith and hope and love of God. There is more faith in God than there is doubt in us. There is more hope in God than there is despair in

us. There is more love in God than there is in our best or worst efforts to reject this love of God.

John used an unusual phrase to describe this. He talked about grace upon grace. I have a wonderful story to tell you. After you hear this story, anytime you hear the phrase “grace upon grace,” you’ll think of this. This past week in some junk mail we received at the house, was an advertisement for a subscription to Martha Stewart’s magazine. Some of you might subscribe to that magazine. It’s called “Martha Stewart Living.” In the advertisement there was a picture of a plate of food. On the plate were asparagus, a couple of sprigs of parsley, and something else that I honestly couldn’t tell you what it was, but it looked pretty. Presentation is important to Martha Stewart.

Let me tell you about “Kipp Wolfe Living”. Suzanne is a wonderful cook. Every once in a while she fixes chicken and noodles. With chicken and noodles she fixes mashed potatoes and of course you have to have corn with that. In “Kipp Wolfe Living,” what you do is get a big glob of mashed potatoes and put it right in the center of the plate. Then you scoop out a hole in the mashed potatoes and put the chicken and noodles right in the middle of the mashed potatoes. Then you put the corn on top of the chicken and noodles. That’s grace upon grace!

Let me tell you something even better. It’s called “God Living.” God took a manger, a cross, and an empty tomb. In so doing, he revealed to us how life is meant to be lived. That is grace upon grace.

It is by grace that we are here this morning. You might have made a resolution to be in church this year, but that’s not why you are here this morning. It is by grace that we are here. God has called us to this place. We might not have even heard God’s call. It might have been in the words or example of parents or grandparents, a Sunday School teacher, or a youth group sponsor, but in those words, God called us to this place.

God offers us a clean slate, a new beginning; not just for this year, but for every day of our lives. When we look in the mirror and see the person in the mirror looking back at us, we hear the words, “You are forgiven.” This grace challenges us to be more gracious with each other. Imagine grace upon grace in our families. Imagine grace upon grace in our marriages, at work, at school, in our friendships, in all those relationships most important to us.

We have completed our We Would Be Building capital campaign,

but the building program is just beginning. We are going to do some things in our church this year that we have never done before to reach out to those who are outside the church, to share grace upon grace with them.

Recently, I heard Franklin Graham interviewed. Franklin Graham is Billy Graham's son. Franklin Graham said the favorite story he ever heard his father tell was this. In a sermon one time, Billy Graham said, "If you're ever driving down the highway and notice a turtle on a fence post, you know that someone had to put that turtle there. That turtle didn't get on top of the fence post by itself." Billy Graham said, "That's how I feel about my ministry. I feel as if God put me here to do this ministry."

Earlier I said it is good to be with you today. I can think of no other place I would rather be than here, sharing this Good News with you about a God who is truthful with us and a God who is gracious with us.

Grace and truth for a new year.

Grace and truth for our church.

Grace and truth for those who are outside our church.

Grace and truth in our own lives.

May it be so for each of us. Amen.