

Amazing Grace - Lent I In the Face of Our Temptations

Amazing Grace, God's Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. Grace - the unearned and undeserved favor of one person toward another. Specifically, God's love for God's people - for us - for poor ornery sinners like you and like me... loving us enough to live and suffer and die for us...

And it is amazing. Why, why should, does, God give us poor ornery, sometimes very ornery creatures even one more day to live? Why not send some meteorite out of its orbit to crash into this planet of sinful people who bloody its ground with war upon war, and almost unspeakable crimes of hatred and greed and anger and lust. Suicide bombers in Bagdad and murderous shootings in Detroit, yesterday.

Why care God, for such a care less people? Why keep caring after the world treated your so very very mean? And yet, this new day dawns and we can find in it or not, God's grace - God's forgiving and new life giving love for us. We can choose to believe or not in God's Grace - in God's care for us. Do we? Do we believe? And do we care enough about the grace given to us to give the best we know of ourselves to be witnesses of God's grace for others to see?

Please pray with me.

Lord you know us. Through and through. How easily we give in to the temptations in life - how quickly we settle for what cannot every satisfy our longing for true goodness, truth and love - your gifts to us in Christ. So this day, we pray that we will listen, and so hear your word, and know anew its power to lead us and guide us, to please us and save us - for the deepest joy in life that only you can give. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of these your loving and faithful people be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Amazing Grace. I picked this theme for the six Sundays in Lent before I even knew about the new movie - Amazing Grace, which opened on Friday. It is a personal, rather quiet, but powerful statement of what God's gift of Grace can do through the lives of those who believe in and trust God and God's word, to guide their lives. The movie is the story of how one man's faith, William Wilberforce, changed the world by bringing an end to the slave trade in Great Britain.

Amazing Grace - America's most popular hymn - sung and listened to by believers, and those who hardly believe anything at all - because... because the hymn touches tender places in almost any human heart and soul.... The tune and the words, growing out of the deep pain and agony and new life giving faith of John Newton, cut to the core of our living. The hymn speaks to a truth we each know deep in our hearts. We are not good people. We are not nearly fully good people. We give in to temptations that control us more than we control them.

Temptation. Its one of the driving forces in our media - but a force that cuts two ways. We read and listen to and watch what bleeds. That's why the dark and dirty and disastrous news leads. And we watch it in part because it distances us from looking at the things not so good in our own lives. And maybe, when we see so much that is not good in the world, it begins to look so bad we don't feel so bad about doing so little to make it better.

Let me say that again. Maybe, when we see so much that is not good in the world, it begins to look so bad we don't feel so bad about doing so little to make it better. The bad news becomes our excuse for not making good news.

But God knows better. And so God will not let the good go un-noticed. So the goodness of God's Amazing Grace keeps pouring into our lives. And every new day is God's gracious gift to us. The chance to discover again and again and again God's forgiving new life giving love for us.

Amazing Grace - and over the next six weeks we will look at the different ways God's grace addresses our needs and keeps shining light into our lives. This week - God's Amazing Grace comes to us, works in our lives, in the face of our temptations.

Temptations? What in heaven's name is wrong with chocolate candy anyway? I mean, what's God got against a Mars Bar? Wasn't chocolate God's idea in the first place? Even if it evolved just to tempt us. It's God's creation - so what's wrong with chocolate? Why give that up for Lent?

Why give anything up for Lent? But - we know - we know why. It's a symbol. Chocolate, or meat, or Starbucks. Whatever we give up for Lent we know its only a symbol. It's a statement of faith. Its exercising our faith and our wills. Its facing the fact that we are tempted to do the very things we know we should not do - and its our statement that we will seek to trust and obey God's call. We will seek to be guided by our faith more than our appetites and wants, our lusts and desires.

In fact, the chocolate bar is at its best, not so much a symbol of what we are willing to give up, but a symbol of what we are willing to take on in our lives. What room we are willing to make in our lives for God's will - before our wills.

And if we will, if we will make a little more room in our lives for God, for God's word, for prayer and study and some good works, then Lent can be a season when God's grace can grow in us, and through us, in the world.

A simple thing - doing a random act of kindness. Because you and I give up something for Lent, chocolate bars, we have a little more change in our pockets - to share. For random acts of kindness for example. See a young family at a restaurant - pay anonymously for their meal - affirm family values in that way.

Because you give up Cable for Lent - could any one really do that? You'd have more time - to time to visit a nursing home, serve at soup kitchen, do fix up chores for a neighbor and or at church. We'd have time to serve the Kingdom.

But these are just symbols, just little signs that - yes - can point us in the right direction, point us toward giving more place and space in our lives to God, and God's word. And God's will - symbols of our willingness to see more clearly God's presence in the challenges we all face

It took a little dramatic incident for a boy named Billy to get the point. Billy was an imp and a cut up at school. If someone was late for class, chewing gum, leaving nasty notes on the bulletin board - that was Billy. Or setting fire to the waste basket and emptying the school on a sunny day.

It got Billy sent to the principal's office - where a tall stern man asked Billy - Billy where is God? Where is God in your life? At which point Billy dashed out of the office, ran all the way home, and panted to his worried Mother - I confess - I lit the fire, but honest - they've lost God - and I don't know where God is?

And - for all the professed belief in God in this country - it seems that a whole lot of people don't know where to find God, or enough about God to be about doing God's will. The words, as Paul said, are near to us. They are on our money, on our lips - part of our pledge of allegiance. But maybe not in our hearts. We trust our IRA's more than the Beattitudes. Our savings more than our Savior.

We pray - lead us not into temptation, but then give God little time or room in our daily lives to guide us away from all that tempts us. And God knows us - and knows what tempts us. And chocolate is only a small piece of our problem.

In his own temptations, Jesus identifies ours. We are tempted to seek a God who serves us and our wants - more than a God whose will can fulfill. We are tempted to worship a God, as Jesus was, who gives us everything we want, rather than a God who wants us to help meet the needs of those who have too little in life.

We are tempted, as Jesus was, to worship a God who makes us look good, favors us, blesses us, more than a god who calls us to be servants in the spirit of Christ. We are tempted as Jesus was. And, we are tempted most of all, to lose faith when for all the sacrifice and sharing and giving we see going on, we find it hard to see any great differences in the world for good.

Amazing Grace. I once was blind, but now I see. How much easier our faith would be if yes, we could see, really see, God and good at work changing our world. But that's part of what it means for us to be saved by faith, isn't it? As Hebrews said Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Still - the wonder and truth is, as Paul said, we can see in part, as through a glass darkly.

We can see the weight good has in the world. If only we could see more clearly. But we can see... It is part of the power of the movie - Amazing Grace - For in the movie we see the impact of John Newton's great hymn about his own change from a Slave Ship Captain to an passionate abolitionist I was blind but now I see. And we see how Newton's hymn became a call to deeper faith and changed the life of William Wilberforce who changed world through his battle against the slave trade by Great Britain.

Moved by Newton's words, and the Bible, Wilberforce found faith, and it took no small faith for him to fight for 40 years to abolish the slave trade. The song became in a way a fight song for faith - and for its victory in life. Through many dangers toils and snares I have already come. Is grace has brought me safe this far, and grace will lead me home.

Sadly, the battles for the hearts and minds and bodies and souls of God's people are not over by far. One million young children or more caught up each year in sex for sale trade - and - right here in America and in Detroit. Children kidnapped and forced into the armies in the Middle East and Africa... And millions of under and un educated inner city youth of many races across our country - trapped in poverty and crime. And the Aids crisis ---

All of this, all of this, human beings tempted to satisfy senses but not the soul deep needs in life.... And in the face of it - God's call to us in Christ to face our temptation to be overwhelmed by the problems we see - And to see instead the power of faith - To see that we have good news to share - of God's Amazing Grace - to share in word and deed.

And - the news is good - the news we have to share - and the news of what God's grace can do. When people - God's people leave room for God's grace to work in their lives, The news is good. Christians at work in Ethiopia have helped to changed the future for a large part of the population just by finding ways to get medicine to treat two infections that were killing huge numbers of people.

Rick Warren and the Purpose Driven Church folk committing millions of dollars and team after team of people to help turn the tide against Aids in Rawanda - and doing it.

And You - through Todd Luke in the Yucatan - providing a way to collect and keep fresh rain water - dramatically improving the health of people - who now know the love of Christ because the water of life was shared.

The Gulf Coast recovery - slow - so slow. But happening, and happening not by gov't action - but happening - really happening because of faithful people - turning from indulging their temptations and instead making room and resource for relief efforts. ...

Words said here - at our Baptism - and at our graves - that by our faith in God's Grace we heirs of God's promises, joint heirs with Christ if so be that we suffer with him that we will also be glorified with him - that God's grace will bring us home

Amazing Grace - people - touched not just by a hymn - but touched by the power of Holy Spirit as John Newton was, confronted by the uncomfortable word that identifies our sin, and then comforted and encouraged and empowered and moved by the words of God's forgiving grace - To share the love of Christ To see a world - not lost - not lost, in spite of all the sinful anguish and agony we still see, and, sadly, as persons and as a nation, are too much a part of....

We know the amazing grace of seeing that over and over and over again .. God promises and provides - that God is good, all the time - and that in the light of Goodness God has promised us in Christ, promised me, His word my hope secures, And .. God's word, God's spirit, The Grace of Christ, will be my shield, my portion, as long as life endures.

And in the face of my temptations I can seek with all my heart and soul and strength - To do all the good I can, in all the ways I can, with all the strength I can, to all the people I can, as long as I can. And then I will be with Jesus. Amazing Grace. Amen.

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