

Know Me! John 1:1-14 / Isaiah 52:7-10

### SLIDE 1 - Nativity Scene

Merry Christmas! This is the highest most holy of days! Today we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord, the Incarnation of God, the Word made flesh, dwelling among us.

All of scripture reveals to the world a God of grace and mercy who wishes to be known. The opening verses of John's gospel declares that all things came into being through God's Word, that is, the world and its people were made by God for relationship with him. God loves the world and sends his Son to it, yet God is not seen. No one knows what God looks like. What can be known about God? What can be carried forward into creation from the God of grace, mercy and love? How is love known in the world?

A renowned author once wrote about the meaning of Christmas. The author described the Christmas of 1956 when she was given an unexpected, overwhelming generous gift: close friends offered her enough money to live on for a year so she could devote her time to writing. They believed in her although she had only published several long stories at this time. They believed her work had value. She had to be assured that the gift was real, that it was not some kind of joke. She was stunned by their generosity. As she listened to them talk about the potential they saw in her writing, she began to come to terms with the gift. Finally, she thought, "This gift will give me life-giving freedom to create." It was then that Harper Lee began to see a future in writing the story that was in her.

With the gift of time, Harper Lee went on to complete in the spring of 1957 a draft which eventually became the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The completed work was published in 1960, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1961, and was soon adapted into a screen play and became an award winning film. Lee said this gift gave her "a full, fair chance for a new life." She had been working as an airline reservation agent and only writing in her spare time. She was getting by handling life on her own. This unexpected generous gift, born of deep friendship, simple love and faith in her potential reminded Lee of the wonder of Christmas. She had received a gift that was freely given and not something that she had earned.

From the fullness of God in Christ Jesus we have all received grace upon grace. The wonder of the grace of God is that it is freely given and never earned. It is given to all human beings and all of creation so that all may flourish. The word of grace comes to us over and over again, first through the Hebrew Scriptures, then through Jesus of Nazareth, and finally, the word continues through the work of the Holy Spirit. All of this comes from the superabundance of the one true God. We are all recipients of this superabundance of God, freely given for us and for our sakes.

I am not sure from what I read that this grand truth was known to Harper Lee. She did not write of it explicitly. Prior to this, Christmas had lost meaning for her. Lee had decided it was mostly for children. She had moved on from her roots in Alabama and was living in New York City, a single and very private woman. But on holidays and special occasions she was welcomed in by friends with their families. It was at those times Lee remembered the Christmases of her youth with a tinge of grief as many of her family were no longer living, or living far away, and the customs of those days were in the past. What Lee had was a yearning for home, and a desire to return. This was not nostalgia. Instead her experience of Christmas was more in line with the Old English sense of the word, to yearn, which means to seek, beg for, or demand what one no longer has.

The yearning that Lee experienced is one that can leave people in a rut. It can stop people from fully moving into a future. It can keep people from singing the praises of God. It can keep people from recognizing the grace and possibility that is already present. Stuck with a yearning for a past that was never going to return, Lee missed the joy of being with her friends. Instead she focused on what she had lost and felt grief. She no longer spent Christmas with her extended family. She was slightly envious of the presents the family who had invited her in shared with each other. Only when she received that one generous gift were her eyes opened. Then she saw that she was worth more than she ever imagined. She was worth the risk. It is the kind of gift that reminds us of the superabundance of the grace of God.

#### SLIDE 2 – Abundant Grace

The superabundance was not just the financial support but the dawning realization that these friends invited her and made her part of their family celebrations. They offered her relationship and connection in a city where it

would be easy to be lost. And they offered her time and space in order to fulfill what would become her life's work. She was cloaked with value and worth. And as it turns out her story was one that resonated with themes of justice in the 1960's and is seeing resurgence on Broadway today. It is a story important to the world.

The story of the nativity of Christ is a story of God's extravagant love and generosity. It is a story of light standing firm against the forces that work to extinguish it. It is the secret-surprise gift, a baby who grows into a boy and finally a man who speaks with authority and acts with great love.

We are heirs of this superabundance, this grace, this generosity, all of which is almost too good to be true. All of this comes from a God whose nature is to communicate and to disclose. It is God's nature to relate and develop kinship. The coming of the Word made flesh at Christmas is the grounds for knowing the deep intimacy of relationship with God. God takes risks in becoming incarnate. God sacrifices that we might know him through a Son that takes on human form, is rejected, suffers, and dies for us. Through this deepening we discover that we are worth more to God than we ever imagined. And God wishes to be known to us, to disclose God's self to us in a way that helps human beings know how to live and how to experience God in their lives.

We are living through a time when we have been unmoored. Life has been disrupted. We return to work, worship, gatherings, school, but it seems that everything has been changed. Nothing is like we remembered. We grieve what used to be. We yearn for a simple return to the way things were and find that life has a new complexity. We might begin to think there is no hope. We lose sight of what is possible. We might think that God is distant and not available.

We suddenly find ourselves capable of not knowing the Word of God. We find ourselves blind to the presence of the Word. And the blindness is dire because to be blind leaves us separated from access to the Word. Living without the light we are attracted to stories of all that is wrong with the world. We find ourselves in a rut, not seeing love and not being love. We simply get by. Then into our disrupted lives, God comes! Into our hopeless hearts, Christ is born! Into the places where light has been dimmed, God makes Godself known!

The scriptures bear witness to God's persistent and abundant grace. We are ones to whom God desires to make children of God. We are those who have been given the gift of the Word made flesh in all of its superabundance. To read and study the written Word is to come to know the fullness of the Word and grace which God freely gives for us. It is to begin to experience again the qualities of life which are God's: love, light, peace, freedom and abundance.

I am reminded of God's superabundance as we gather for worship this Christmas. I am reminded of God's superabundance whenever we gather around the Word for in my confirmation classes and adult study as I learn as much from those who participate as I do from my study and preparation. I am reminded of God's superabundance as I work alongside other people gifted with generosity. There is knowledge of superabundance in Larry Everson's 20 years of raising awareness of hunger issues while raising funds. There is knowledge of superabundance in the Christmas Gift Giving project of Caring Ministry. I am reminded of God's superabundance among family members and friends who offer each other grace and love and relationship while nurturing a sense of worth and value in the other.

You likely have more evidence of God's abundant grace to add to the list.

Merry Christmas on this most holy of days where we see again how God comes once again with a deep desire to be known and to give freely for the sake of the world!