

How Does Grace Come Into Our Lives?

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Scripture: Psalm 105:1-4
from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*

Hallelujah! Thank God! Pray to God by name! Tell everyone you meet what God has done! Sing God songs, belt out hymns, translate God's wonders into music! Honor God's holy name with Hallelujahs, you who seek God. Live a happy life! Keep your eyes open for God, watch for God's works; be alert for signs of God's presence.

The question I want to pose for us this morning is: How does grace come into our lives? Author and theologian Frederick Buechner offers us this answer:

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is.
In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement
and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden
heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments,
and life itself is grace.

Buechner is right, I think, when he urges us to live with the awareness that life itself is grace, that all the moments of our lives are "key moments." With every breath we take, we are inhaling grace. But just as we are usually unaware of our own breathing, so we are often unaware of the way grace comes into our lives. Instead of listening to our life in the present moment, we often are listening to the echoes of the past or to the hopeful or fearful possibilities of the future. When we listen to our lives with the intention of *being in* our lives, we become more aware of how life itself is grace. But because we live so much of the time without that awareness – that grace is everyday all around us and flowing through us – we often think of grace as coming into our lives as a surprise. In a poem entitled "At the Cancer Clinic," Ted Kooser, shows us how grace can surprise us.

She is being helped toward the open door
that leads to the examining rooms
by two young women I take to be her sisters.
Each bends to the weight of an arm
and steps with the straight, tough bearing
of courage. At what must seem to be
a great distance, a nurse holds the door,
smiling and calling encouragement.
How patient she is in the crisp white sails
of her clothes. The sick woman
peers from under her funny knit cap
to watch each foot swing scuffing forward
and take its turn under her weight.
There is no restlessness or impatience
or anger anywhere insight. Grace
fills the clean mold of this moment
and all the shuffling magazines grow still.

“Grace fills the clean mold of this moment and all the shuffling magazines grow still” because everyone is listening to that moment, because everyone in that waiting room is aware of the grace that is touching them. And for those of us who have been treated in the cancer clinic, or who have accompanied loved ones, we know how common such an occurrence is when the grace we call compassion fills a room, fills hearts with courage. My friends, “all moments are key moments and life itself is grace.”

Here are two stories that witness to that truth. The first story comes from one of the summers when we were campground hosting at Rasar State Park in Washington. One of the reasons I treasure our days in the Northern Cascades is that I spend most of my days and evenings outdoors where the birds, the river and trees, the stars and elk, and yes, even the campers, often redeem me, liberate me from my excessive self-attending. I am a list-maker and love the satisfaction of crossing off tasks when they are done. I’ve even been known to write one down after it is completed, just so I can cross it off. Being a campground host with a set of daily chores to be done each day is great fodder for a list-maker; it keeps me right in the groove of self-attending. Like the night I was out checking on a car that didn’t belong in the campground. It was 11:00 pm, and it had been a long, tiring day. As I closed the entrance gates, I was feeling how tired I was and thinking about how good it would be to fall into bed. But before I could get back to our campsite, the ranger asked if I could take four bundles of firewood to one of the group campgrounds. A young Asian man standing next to the ranger with a bike said he would wait for me at the gate and guide me to the campsites that were to get the firewood. I loaded the firewood into the work cart and drove over to the campground where I followed the man on the bike into the camping area and rode into a scene out of a movie.

With the forest wrapped in darkness as a backdrop, there were small propane lanterns hung on poles illuminating each of the twelve camp sites that were arranged in a circle around a large grassy center. In the circle of each light from the lanterns I could see women cooking on the picnic tables and men putting up tents. I delivered the firewood, and before I could leave, one of the men asked if I could bring them four bags of ice. He apologized for asking, and explained that they were from Vancouver and had been delayed by the long lines at the border crossing.

When I returned with the ice, the appreciation was lavish. As I unloaded the ice, I noticed beautiful Persian rugs were spread out under the canvas canopies, and I realized that these folks were the Indonesian Muslim family camp that I had heard was coming for the weekend. They invited me to stay for dinner that was nearly ready. An array of precisely cut vegetables filled gleaming bowls on the carpets. The women who were frying chicken smiled and nodded as if to say I was welcome. When I declined, one of the women wrapped six chicken wings in a paper towel and gave it to one of the men who handed it to me. I thanked them and left, but I drove only a short distance into a shadowed area near the gate, where I paused. From there, I could see the glow of the small lanterns. A breeze brought the spicy smells of their cooking pots to me, but what captivated me most of all was the mystical silence that held the conversations going on around each campfire. I sat there for a long time – listening. I was mesmerized by the magic of the stars overhead and by the compelling scene before me. It was another one of those summer moments that redeemed me from my habitual self-attending and gave me an unforgettable taste of being alive, of being connected to this incredible world. “All moments are key moments and life itself is grace.” “Keep your eyes open for God,” the poet in Psalm 105 tell us. “Be alert for God’s presence.”

The second story is by Linda Spence who has written about a memorable train ride. She writes:

...once not too long ago, with a warm longing from train trips years before, I ventured again, this time alone, on The California Zephyr – Chicago to San Francisco. Compartments were about the price of the Four Seasons and seemed kind of unfriendly, so I booked coach.

The first night out, I tried to settle myself for the night and re-convince myself that taking the train sit-up had been a good idea. I was working pretty hard at it, with three quarters of my car

filled with forty tireless kids from New York City, aged eight to sixteen. They were on their way to Friendship Camp in Fort Collins Colorado where they'd spend a week with other disadvantaged kids from all over the world. During the day they were very, very, very cute with their dazzlingly intricate corn rows and cool edgy urban talk suddenly shattered by delights... ("hey, man, she say, listen to me... hey, don' you be messin' wi' me. I'll tell, I will.... I'll tell.... You better not be talking to that one, cuz he fine... he fine.... HEY, look out there...out THERE.... I SEE A WINDMILL.... I DO, I DO, A REAL WINDMILL. Is just like I'm in another country!")

My seat was right on the way to their favorite thing to do: seeing what's happenin' in the lounge car, opening the clattering door between cars for the twelve millionth time. About 9:30 pm between my thoughts of *Why did I do this?* I kept reminding myself, *it's only one night, it's only one night*, but I dreaded how long the night would be.

Grateful for the rocking action, I tried all my relaxation techniques, and finally one of the chaperones began herding the kids forward into their seats. As I forced my eyelids to stay shut, I imagined giggling and shushes and complaints late into the night. I heard one of the chaperones talking to them, and I opened one eye a slit. She was standing in the aisle at the far end of the car. The lights were turning off. *She's probably telling them what the plans are for getting off in Denver in the morning.* I closed my eyes. She talked on and on, quietly, for about ten minutes. I hoped she was threatening them.

Then, very softly she began to sing: *Blessed Assurance..., Jesus is mine. O what a foretaste of glory divine.* I opened my eyes. *This is my story, this is my song. Praising my savior all the day long.* The car was dark now, and as the verse floated through the car like the comfort of a mother's voice, the children softly joined in. By the time they sang *Perfect submission, perfect delight, visions of rapture now burst on my sight*, everyone in the car, everyone, had joined in the tender singing as if we had rehearsed for lifetimes. *Angels descending bring from above, echoes of mercy, whispers of love. This is my story, this is my song.*

Six achingly lovely verses, and then it was quiet. The woman then recited the 23rd Psalm with inflections and feelings that had me upright, open-mouthed, staring into the darkness, grasping to see every detail of her face, which I knew was beautiful. Then she sat down, and another chaperone pulled himself up heavily and said a prayer. His back was to me so I couldn't make out many of the words, but in his deep voice I heard the reverence.

I sat back in the dark and eased into my contorted nighttime position with a wondrous, dopey grin of gratitude. *This is why we travel together. There wasn't a sound for the rest of that night filled with the goodness, lost in the love, perfect submission, all is at rest.*

My friends, believe it. Please believe it. All the moments in our lives are key moments. Life itself is grace. That is our story. That is our song.

Let all God's people say, "Amen."