

Grace Upon Grace
First UMC of Pocatello
December 19, 2021

John 1:1-18

When we're in trouble, songs strengthen us.

Some songs, like spirituals or blues tunes, offer strength by being audaciously honest about pain. The singer makes her struggle bearable by giving it a name and weaving it into a shareable story, no matter how lonesome she feels: "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child... A long way from home." And if *you've* ever felt all alone in the world, well, someone else out there gets it, gives your sorrow a voice.

Other songs catch us up in their swing, their pulse, their rhythm. Their magic is in making us move, in possession. They remind the body of its inner strength; they unstick the spirit. It's much harder to carry all the problems of the world when you're dancing as hard as you can.

And still other songs reach upward to the heavens; they go in for magnificence and rapture. The great composers and performers play with fire, hurl down on paper some of the glory and harmonious wholeness of reality. Their songs empower us by winging our spirits up to higher ground and changing the very angle of our mind's perceptions.

This week, most of the headlines were about omicron, the swift-spreading variant of COVID-19 that is threatening to overwhelm hospitals and plunge all of us deeper into the pit of fatigue and frustration that we've been mired in since the spring of 2020. Most of us have already dealt with the disappointment of having the vaccine rollout sucker punched by misinformation and the Delta surge. In our life as a congregation, most questions about how to proceed with worship and

programs have been answered first with “I don’t know,” and later with lackluster, only halfway satisfying solutions. As a pastor, I have heard from many folks that the pandemic has introduced a kind of void into their lives, an emptiness that is gobbling up optimism and goodwill – even faith.

Is there a song for us?

The Bible offers the prologue to John’s Gospel, also known as the Johannine Hymn. It is one of those songs with a stunning scope. It does for the ear what getting a glimpse of the Milky Way does for the eye. In its eighteen verses the song sings of God and the beginning, of Word and flesh, of light and life, glory and grace, rejection and believe, the Father and the Son and all God’s children. This song was written to sweep its hearers up into the majesty of God’s dealings with humankind, into the eternal view of things. In doing so, it seeks to convince the human heart of what it proclaims, that from the fullness of Christ we all have received “grace upon grace.” Well, what are some of those graces, and how do they help us today?

To begin, although the pandemic has cast over our minds a kind of pall, such that many of us have lost any intuition about what the future holds, and although it has robbed us of the pleasure of being in community in a carefree way, the Hymn says: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:3c-5, 9).

God is light – this is a great comfort. For light, unlike sound, can move freely through empty voids and vacuums; light travels unimaginably fast, 186,000 miles per second; and there are so many more frequencies of light in this world than our eyes are capable of seeing. God is light! God is always swiftly and successfully coming to us, no matter what vast vacancy we feel within or without. And the gifts of God are so manifold, the presence of God is so varied and thick, that we can trust that God is with us even in invisible ways. We can search

for God in new places – tuning into different frequencies or looking through the eyes of other creatures, some who see more colors than we see. The first grace is light.

Second, where the pandemic has eroded our estimation of human goodness and seemed to reveal a selfish core to human nature, the Hymn reminds us: “[Christ] was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (John 1:10-11).

Human beings have always had the choice to acknowledge their finitude and need, to return to God, to develop their compassion and wisdom. Yet when the Source and Creator of all life dressed in flesh to walk among us, when Jesus was literally walking the dusty roads of Galilee and Jerusalem, there were those who overlooked or rejected his revelation of love. The second grace is strange: In a world where God is *always* rejected, the Hymn saves us from catastrophizing about our present moment, and reminds us to do what the faithful have always done: receive God into our hearts, and let God turn us toward others in love.

Third, where the pandemic has confronted so many of us with our essential powerlessness – we can’t stop the waves of variants; we can’t seem to sway public opinion or global trends with our individual choices and sacrifices – the Hymn says, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12).

The power God gives is very rarely the power to exert influence over someone or something. It is almost always the *power of becoming*, power to *become children of God*. The power God gives to each of us is the power to become more like Christ, to deepen our fellowship with him, to practice repentance, to discover and share the gifts and fruits that the Holy Spirit awakens in us. *This* is true power, because no circumstantial setback can take it away. In God’s hands, all

circumstances become like a sculptor's tools, and we are chiseled and smoothed into the works of art that God sees when God looks at us. This throws some responsibility back on us. Even now, who, or what, are we becoming? This is the third grace: the power to grow.

Finally, where the pandemic has bullied our faith and made us cry out, "Where are you, God?" the Hymn says, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14). Even if the Hymn goes in for the language of lofty majesty, its message is earthbound: God has taken on flesh and blood and bone.

If our primary understanding of God is of a distant Being who is "up there somewhere" looking down, then God must either be aloof and unaware of our pain, or powerless to help us, or extremely cruel. But this is not the God the song sings about. No, the song sings about a God who dwells among us, who, from the inside of our lives, reveals glory and grace and truth. God has joined us in our present. God goes with us into and through our suffering.

The fourth grace is that God is in all the earthy, human things we do. God is in the cooking, the painting, the visiting, the decluttering, the trail walking. God is in the phone calls we make to see how our neighbors are doing. God is in silence and conversation. Jesus was always *very* clear: What we do for the poor and hungry and thirsty and imprisoned we do for him, because he is in them (see Matt. 25). And when we wash the feet of the world, when we become servants, then God is *in us* (see John 13). That the pandemic has deprived us of much is very real. Equally real is the Christ who looked at things like bread and wine and salt and lamplight and water and vines and said, "Oh, I'm just like that, and that, and that..."

So, there *is* a song for us.

There is a song unspooling graces before our eyes.

And yet... even our *favorite* songs can be hit or miss. We might listen, we might sing – but there is no magic trick for stirring the heart. What to do when we know the words, when we know the melody, but its majesty eludes us?

Even here, grace is provided, for the song gives us a model of faith: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light... He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light” (John 1:6-8).

We are not the light.

But, like John, we can witness to the light. A witness *points*. A witness *verifies, validates*. All of us can point, whether we “feel it” in the moment or not.

Even with failed understanding and bruised strength, even with doubts about the goodness of God and others, we can point and say, “*There. That one.* In the Christ there is light and glory, sobering truth and stunning access to grace.”

That’s what faith is anyway: a pointing beyond ourselves, a perception, a reception.

Before the modern scientific understanding of light, some ancient philosophers believed that the human eye was the source of light, that rays of light went out from the eyes to illuminate the world. Others thought that it was the world that was the source of light, that light shone out from objects toward the human eye. Well, thanks be to God that light, true light, always comes from beyond us; that it is in the light cast off from another’s body that we come to see all things.

In the name of God our Creator, God our Redeemer, and God our Sustainer. Amen.