

Advent 4 12/22/19
Romans 1:7 A

GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FAITHER AND THE LORD JESUS CHRIST.

Well, it's the week of Christmas, and you know what that means. Your mailbox is filling up with Christmas cards. In fact, they've probably been arriving for some days now. If they don't feature beaming kids and grandkids, they are brilliant in color; some even add sparkle and glitter to add beauty.

Some are quite secular. Just this past week, I received a card wishing me a happy "winter solstice". Some are funny, or supposed to be funny, like my favorite card of all time. The cover features a floor lamp next to an Archie Bunker-style chair, with a reindeer seated and reading the newspaper. A reindeer, I should point out, with bright red nose. When you open the card, your view widens out to a panoramic view of the room which shows Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donder, and Blitzen all mounted and hanging on the wall. And the card reads simply, "they ... **used** ... to laugh and call him names." Some are clearly Christian in their message, you know: "May the miracle of Christmas be yours today and always." All these cards have one thing in common: they bring you Christmas greetings.

St. Paul sends you a Christmas card this morning, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Ro 1:7). This card is very, very different from all the rest. I mean that in this sense: All the others are wishing you something for the holidays. Paul isn't wishing us anything. He's **giving** us something: Grace and peace. Boom, there it is. Which is a most wonderful thing because we need it.

Grace is God's favor without any merit or worthiness in us. The truth of our human condition is that we don't deserve it. I saw a good cartoon this week: Dennis the Menace is sitting on Santa's lap -- bear with me it's Christmas, ok. And the Menace is saying to jolly old St. Nick, "I'm trying to be good, but I just don't have any experience at it." You know who else doesn't have any experience at being good? You, in the sinfulness of your human condition.

The Bible says this: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Mt 10:28)." But, you don't fear God above all. You fear people – not in the sense they will kill you or throw you in prison for being a Christian. You fear what they will think of you – when you don't allow someone to copy your homework, when you don't join in their gossip at the coffee table, when you don't laugh at their dirty joke in the break room.

And the Bible says this: "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life (Mk 6:27, NIV)?" But you do worry. And your worry is your way of saying you do not believe God is in control of His creation and your life. Worry is your way of saying you may not get your way.

Oh, and how about this: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ep 4:32)." But, you don't. To be sure, you expect God to forgive you. But, you don't forgive your neighbor; in fact, quite the opposite – you stay angry and keep a record of wrongs.

And the Psalmist says: "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever (Ps 136:1)." No, no, and no. You don't thank God because you think you deserve what you have. And if the truth be known, you even expect more and more and more.

The truth is what you yourself confessed this day: You have sinned against God in your thoughts, words, and deeds. You have sinned against God and your neighbor. And you deserve only God's temporal and eternal punishment. You don't deserve God's grace.

But, the GOOD NEWS of the Gospel is that God does not treat you as your sins deserve. GRACE can be defined this way: God's Riches At Christ's Expense.

Look at the Grace of God in our lessons this Sunday: "Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel (Is 7:14)." The virgin was Mary, and the son she bore was God's very own Son in the flesh.

The Angel says to Joseph of Mary's son, "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins (Mt 1:21)." Jesus, "Savior", the One who saved you by taking upon His human flesh all the times you feared people more than God; you're your worry; all the times you looked down your nose at your neighbor and refused to forgive; all the times you thought God owed you more; all the times you sinned against God and your neighbor; and He carried it all to the cross, where His blood was shed for you. Nailed to that wooden rod of torture, He died for you, for your sins, bearing the punishment for them all. And, that means Dear Child of God, that you are forgiven. And you can be certain and comforted by that because He rose again from the dead on the 3rd day as proof that God the Father accepted His sacrifice upon Calvary for the forgiveness of the world.

He gives you that forgiveness by means of the Word, for God's Word does exactly what it says, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Ro 10:17)."

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” St. John writes. God sent His Word into the flesh at His birth at Christmas. Now, He delivers grace and peace to you. By His grace in Christ, you have the forgiveness of sins, and with sins forgiven, you have **peace**. And, no one needs to tell you this, Dear Child of God, but you know all too well that you need it.

The book of Acts tells us, “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (14:22).” And one understands that tribulation better than you, Dear Child of God, because you live it every day.

An 18-year-old New York college student is murdered in cold blood, and a 13-year-old is arrested and another teenager sought for questioning. A groom was beaten to death by two men who crashed his wedding reception.

But, we don’t need to look at the big city to find tribulation, do we? Each week, in our prayers we remember our brothers and sisters in Christ – those grieving the loss of loved ones; those struggling with physical illness and challenges; those whose lives and property has been torn apart by natural disasters. For some, their tribulations are known; but for others, their burdens are **unseen** and **unknown**: the pain and anguish that linger after being hurt by sin; the depression and despair that just won’t go away; the pain and loneliness of a marriage hanging by a thread; the child who breaks your heart. How quickly the tribulations and darkness of this present age can easily and quickly overcome us to rob us of the joy of Christmas.

In God’s grace, He sent Jesus to say to you, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid (Jn 14:27).” The Prophet Isaiah says, “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you,

because he trusts in you (Is 26:3).” It is well with your soul because you have received grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.