

Happy New Year! Have you made any resolutions for the coming year? Broken any of them yet? This is the time of year when we think about our wishes and dreams and even try to put some action behind our hopes. One of the things we often say as we ring in the new year is, "I sure hope this year will be better than the last one." This year we got to do it with a whole decade too. One of my favorite newspaper columnists is Leonard Pitts, who writes for the Miami Herald. I got to know him through the Buffalo News and now find him online. His column a few weeks ago was entitled "Oh boy, they're almost over," referring to the decade of the Ohs. And he wonders what name we might give to the decade just past, like the Roaring 20s, the Swinging 60s, the Me Decade, the Greed Decade. And he suggests it might be fitting to call them the Uh Ohs because the Ohs were a whole decade in which things fell apart. Remember hanging chads, 9/11, Abu Ghraib, Hurricane Katrina, bailouts, foreclosures, inconvenient truths, birthers, death panels, "Mission accomplished," Proposition 8, the suspension of civilized discourse. Pitts: "That was the Uh Ohs, and the best thing you can say about them is that they're almost over. Something to remember in the last minute of December 31st as the clock ticks relentlessly toward the new, the next."

Well, the "new and the next" is here, and the column got me wondering about our proclivity for putting boundaries on time: the end of one year being different from the beginning of another, the character of some years defining a whole decade. And then when I read the scripture texts for this week, I realized that they're doing just the opposite. They actually blast away at our boundary-making. They reach all the way back to the beginning of all space and time, and then stretch forward to their fulfillment in cosmic redemption. The Prologue of John's gospel transports us back to "in the beginning" and presents Jesus as the primordial Word, Logos, Wisdom of God. Then Paul launches us into the future, proclaiming that God's Wisdom will find its ultimate resolution in gathering up all things in Christ.

Reading these reminded me of a video I once saw, and I found one like it on YouTube, called "From Milky Way to Quarks" which takes you visually from the outer reaches of known space, into our solar system, to earth, to a particular continent, country, neighborhood, oak tree, and then all the way down to the quarks of an oak leaf, into its fundamental particles of matter. The one I remember went into the depths of a human hand. These videos do for space what Paul and the writer of John do for time – they open us up to the vastness of time and space and cause us to sing at the cosmic wonder of it all.

This is a very different way of looking at the Christmas story than what we read on Christmas Eve, isn't it? But John's gospel is like that. While Matthew, Mark, and Luke portray Jesus as a rabbi, a carpenter, an itinerant preacher, John borrows from Greek philosophy to describe Jesus as the Logos, and uses a lot of metaphysical themes like light/ darkness, life/ death, time/ eternity - also metaphors like Bread of Life, Living Water, Good Shepherd.

John gives us a different way of looking at Jesus and at what the Christmas story means to us. It's as if the earlier readings tell what happened, while this reading tells why it happened; the earlier readings celebrate the Feast of the Nativity, while today's reading unfolds the Mystery of the Incarnation. These texts are not just about mysteries of space and time. Or of past and future. In the video, there is a time in which the camera is honing in on a recognizable neighborhood and buildings. Or in the other video, a particular person whose own hand is then explored. The point is that the cosmic is also the down-to-earth, the particular. This Word, this Logos, this Wisdom of God is not some distant reality that might deign to appear in our world from time to time, rather, it is enfleshed. At Christmas we celebrate that God's eternal Wisdom makes its home among real, flesh and blood human beings. And that in the revelation of the Wisdom of God in Jesus, in the Word made flesh, in our particular bodies and lives, we receive "grace upon grace."

Now that is the Christmas gift that keeps on giving. How different from seeing the world from the limitations of the Uh Oh Decade. Rather we see how God's Word transcends all barriers, how God's Word can create anew when by human standards everything else seems lost. Grace upon grace. It's true, though, isn't it, that we are often overwhelmed by the Uh Ohs? As far as I know, at the ringing in of the new year, the troubles of the world have not ceased, troubles of our lives have not been magically resolved. So where and what is this grace upon grace anyway?

According to John, God's amazing grace is what brings us light: "a light that shines in the darkness, a light that the darkness has never overcome. Light/ Darkness is one of those metaphysical themes of John's gospel. I expect that each of us has had the experience of being "in the dark" and perhaps even feeling like we'd be overcome by it. Grace upon grace is being assured that the light of God's love and compassion, God's understanding and wisdom will deliver us and we will not be overcome. Not this time, not ever. There are no boundaries to God's grace.

And according to Paul, God's amazing grace is what brings us truth: “even as God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world . . . who destined us in love to be God’s children . . . When you heard the word of truth, you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, which is the pledge of our inheritance . . .” Believing the truth that you are a beloved child of God - and remembering that each and every day is grace upon grace – no boundaries, no limits.

And according to the prophet Jeremiah, God's amazing grace is what brings us home. The reading from Jeremiah describes Israel's joyful return from exile, which is another metaphor we can understand. Being in exile, whether geographically or feeling emotionally cut off, is painful, is homesickness to the nth degree. It's possible to live “at home” and still feel alienated. Likewise, it's possible to have people in our midst who feel excluded. The grace in Jeremiah is the picture of God tenderly reaching out to bring us back where we belong. And - it's in our reaching out to the alienated, excluded, and exiled of our neighborhood and world. Grace upon grace is the overwhelming joy of homecoming.

And so on this new day, in this brand new year, on the 10th Day of Christmas, we continue to sing the joy of Christmas. Because the mystery of the Incarnation that began in Jesus doesn't end there. It draws us in too; we are part of the enfleshing of the Word, the Wisdom of God. It's not just that Jesus was born; but also that we are born, and re-born, and called to come together into new relationships and new possibilities. We are called to put flesh on God’s Word for peace and justice and wholeness and compassion and love.

The Uh Oh Decade may be over. And it's too soon to tell what we'll call this new decade, although there will surely be “uh oh” moments in it too. But Jeremiah, and Paul, and John remind us to look at the big picture – I mean the really big picture from “in the beginning” all the way to the “fullness of time” - but also including our own neighborhoods, houses, and hands.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, filled with grace and truth. May the blessings of Christmas and the promise of the new year be with you always.

Amen