

St. Giles' Episcopal Church
June 6, 2010 – 2 Pentecost
1 Kings 17:8-24; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17
“Amazing Grace”
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

In the name of God, who has called us through his grace. Amen.

This morning every passage of scripture is about God's power and compassion and grace in action. How does God act? To provide food for the hungry, to give justice to the oppressed, to set prisoners free, to open the eyes of the blind, to care for strangers, to sustain widows and orphans, to turn a persecutor of the church into an apostle of Christ, to raise the dead to life. Holy Scripture bears witness to God's action in the lives of women and men in particular places at particular times. Since the biblical record of God's action was completed, God has continued to act, does continue to act, in the same ways.

One of the terms we use to describe God's saving action is “grace.” I looked in the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer to see how the Episcopal Church defines grace. “Grace is God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills” (page 858). Grace has also been described as supernatural assistance bestowed by God upon us for our sanctification.

We have just sung a hymn that so many people love, “Amazing Grace.” You may know about the Englishman who wrote the words of this hymn in 1779, John Newton. He spent many years as a merchant sailor and slave trader. He was converted through the preaching of George Whitefield, a fellow preacher and friend of John Wesley. Newton was ordained in the Church of England and served a parish in London. With another

friend, William Wilberforce, Newton worked vigorously for the abolition of the slave trade. By God's grace Newton's blind eyes were opened and his life course was dramatically changed.

In his letter to the Galatians St. Paul refers to his conversion. He had been "violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it" (Galatians 1:13). On his way to Damascus to find followers of Jesus there, Paul – then named Saul – was struck blind by a light from heaven that flashed around him while he heard Jesus ask, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul was blind for three days and then healed by Ananias, who was sent by Jesus to restore Paul's sight through the laying on of hands. Paul was then baptized, and we know what an amazing apostle for the Lord he became.

John Newton and St. Paul both knew the power of God's grace and favor, unearned and undeserved. They knew the power of God's grace to forgive their sins, enlighten their minds, stir their hearts, and strengthen their wills. By God's grace their lives were changed and they became instruments of God's grace for others.

I think one of the reasons that "Amazing Grace" is such a popular hymn is that so many people can "plug in" the particulars of their life stories to the story John Newton tells: "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." I would encourage all of us to spend time thinking and perhaps writing about the action of God's grace in our lives. Our stories may not be as dramatic as Newton's or St. Paul's stories, but God's grace is surely there, over and over again. Think about how God has worked in your life through other people, and think about how you have felt God's direct grace and guidance. Call to mind and heart the action of God's grace in your life, then sing "Through many

dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; 'tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”

In the Bible we encounter many witnesses to the compassionate love of God for human beings. In this morning's Old Testament lesson God acts through the prophet Elijah to miraculously feed a poor widow and her son and then raise the dead child to life. There is a clear parallel between this passage and this morning's gospel lesson from Luke.

Jesus was traveling with his disciples – teaching and healing – when he came to the town called Nain. “As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow” (Luke 7:12). In other words, the grieving woman had lost her only means of support. She no longer had anyone to provide for her needs. There is no record that anyone asked Jesus to intervene in this sad situation. Luke writes, “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not weep’” (Luke 7:13). Then he touched the bier, spoke to the young man, and called him back to life. Jesus was moved by compassion for the woman's suffering and her need, and he acted to bring life and hope where there was death and hopelessness.

Perhaps if you think about the action of God and God's grace in your life, you will remember – as I do – being in trouble and darkness without hope or any inkling of what might bring you help or comfort or healing. Yet somehow God called you back to life. Somehow you knew God's compassionate love.

What should our response to God's compassion and grace be? First, thanksgiving to God. Do you remember the account of Jesus healing ten lepers? Nine of them went

about their business, and only one returned to thank Jesus and praise God. Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” (Luke 17:11-19).

Taking the loving help of God for granted is not the right response!

Beyond giving thanks, I think we are meant to bring God’s grace to others, as John Newton and St. Paul did. After we have asked ourselves how God has acted in our lives, our next question should be, how might we be instruments of God’s grace in the lives of others? This is a question to ask God regularly. And it is also good to turn to Scripture to find answers. From this morning’s lessons alone we can make a list of God’s actions that may guide our actions: to provide food for the hungry, to give justice to the oppressed, to set prisoners free, to open the eyes of the blind, to care for strangers, to sustain widows and orphans. When our hearts are filled with thanks for God’s love and grace, we will rejoice at the opportunities God gives us to bring God’s love and grace to God’s other children. Amen.