

**Resurrection Lutheran Church
Chicago, Illinois
Second Sunday of Christmas
January 2, 2011**

Jeremiah 31: 7-14
Ephesians 1:3-14
John 1: 1-9; 10-18

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.
A blessed New Year!

I begin this morning with a word of gratitude for each of you, for the ministry of Resurrection, for the exceptional leadership and especially the preaching of Pastor Brian Hiortdahl, for your many gifts as a musician, Gary.

As you know, Ione and I have very public lives. Most often on Sundays, I am the one proclaiming the word. Resurrection is a community of faith in which we are fed and nourished richly. You have received us as fellow members of a marvelous congregation engaged in wonderful ministry. Thank you for your support of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod and the ELCA, including the World Hunger Program.

I often ask people to share one unfulfilled dream for their life. So what would one of yours be? What is one thing you hope to do, someone you want to meet or a place you'd like to go before your life is over?

One of mine is that I could play the blues piano like Lazy Bill Lucas and have B.B. King back me up on the guitar. Now you may have never heard of Lazy Bill Lucas. He was not famous, but he was the first person I heard who could play the blues like those Chicago-formed Delta region blues players.

I have a long way to go to realize my dream since I don't even play the piano. I much prefer the blues to other forms of jazz because there is a lively interplay between the guitarist's base chords and the improvisations as the keyboard player riffs.

This morning's familiar reading from John's gospel is the Christmas gospel, but without the characters. No Mary or angels or shepherds or Joseph. No narrative about the response of those characters to the wonder and mystery of Jesus' birth. It is rather the sounding of the chord that has existed through all of time: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1 NRSV).

Ah, but then comes the improvisation. A few years ago I read a theologian's description of our "improvisational God" and that image has never left me. Maybe it is a bit of a stretch to keep the metaphor of the blues going when it comes to God but why not? Think of the base chords that are always beneath God's improvising:

God's gift of life
God's loving all that God creates
God's granting us great freedom
God's desire ... (No, that's too weak.)

God's relentless will to restore us to relationship with God and with one another – in community.

Yes, God's will to save

With these base chords, God begins to improvise: choosing an aging barren couple, Abraham and Sarah, to be the ancestors of God's chosen people, calling an inarticulate Moses—a murderer on the run—to lead God's people from bondage in Egypt to freedom. And just when they started leaving the security of slavery and were drawn to worshipping a golden calf, God improvised again, giving the people 10 commandments, saying, "Follow these and you will continue to live in the freedom I give you."

Oh, yes God is an improvisational God banishing, God's people to exile in Babylon when their faith faltered, bringing them home through the wilderness, speaking to them through a foreign leader, Cyrus, and prophets who spoke words of judgment and hope with poetry and power.

But had God exhausted God's capacity to improvise in how God might convincingly reveal the base chords of God's life-giving word of God's steadfast love and God's will to restore us to communion with God and God's creation? As familiar as the story of Jesus might be for you, try for a moment to step back and ponder the wonder and mystery of the incarnation. Just think: God would be so improvisational that God would choose for God's living word—present from the beginning to now—to take on human flesh. It is almost beyond belief, is it not?

When we are busy with the riffing and improvising of our lives, we may not hear or trust the base chords of God's grace and God's love. But God does not abandon God's creation, bending low and meeting us where we are in the bedlam and beauty, the chaos and creativity, and the suffering and rejoicing of being human.

Over the years in Chicago, I have had fascinating conversations with my doctor, who is Jewish. We have had lively discussions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and what will bring a just and lasting peace. In my last appointment he suddenly stopped, wheeled across the room on his stool, looked me in the eye and said, "I know you are a bishop and everything but tell me, honestly, do you really believe in Jesus, that he was the Messiah, that because of him God forgives sins?"

Now I must confess, I have never been asked to testify to my faith in Jesus while wrapped in a paper gown. But testify I did. I launched into my riff on God's improvising on God's love for us until God finally decided to become one of us in Jesus so that God might reconcile the whole creation to God and reconcile us to one another for Jesus' sake—forgiving us, loving us, making us a new creation and entrusting to us this work of reconciliation.

I was on a roll, and he was ready to get on with my physical. But I wasn't done. "Yes, I believe in Jesus but finally it is not about my believing, but about God's faithfulness to God's promises made to your ancestors. It is about our receiving grace upon grace through this one Jesus the Messiah, God Emmanuel, God with us, the Word made flesh." "OK, OK," he said, "You do believe!"

Do you remember about 10-12 years ago we were being asked to write personal mission statements? Do you recall what you wrote? I remember a financial planner meeting with us. He asked Ione and me to each write a personal mission statement. Now Ione is a woman of the Western North Dakota prairies. There are vast open spaces between people and one has respect for the mystery and dignity of being human and so would never go in someone's home and ask them to write a personal mission statement.

You should have seen her expression and response to his request. I can't recall what she wrote, something like, "Get out now!" If I were to write such a statement, it would be from John's gospel, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace!"

(John 1:16, NRSV) Grace upon grace is a base chord in our lives of faith." Did you hear the writer to the Ephesians sound this chord? "In him (Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, that he lavished on us" (Ephesians 1:7-8, NRSV).

"Yes, from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16, NRSV). But as familiar as the word grace is, how would you describe God's grace to someone who asked you its meaning in your life? Joseph Sittler wrote, "What I am appealing for is and understanding of grace that has the magnitude of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The grace of God is not simply a holy hypodermic whereby my sins are forgiven. It is the whole giftedness of life, the wonder of life which causes me to ask questions that transcend the moment."¹

But I wonder, dare I say I worry, whether the riffing of so many Christians these days over who is welcome into the community of faith and on what terms has drowned out the base chords of God's grace and base chord of God's living word becoming flesh in Jesus the Christ.

I have a good friend who has been a very public figure in Minnesota for years, a featured columnist in the Minneapolis paper, an author, a mountain climber who is over the age 80 and continues to climb the Himalayas. He is one of those people who is constantly sought out for autographs and speeches for his wit and wisdom until his arrest for driving under the influence of alcohol hit the front pages of the paper. His supposedly well-protected private life began to unravel publicly. He lost his position with the paper, and after a year, his second marriage. There we sat, his daughter and I, in a hospital room with him at a treatment center where he consented to go, following our intervention.

He later wrote about the experience in a book titled, *Pursued by Grace*. He wrote, "But I know today that what brought God into that room in the treatment center was not only a cry of despair but my exhaustion from running. Here was a place where I could no longer hide. My flight ended with a simple admission. I was powerless alone."²

When we are weary from the fleeing, when we are exhausted because we have tried to live the myth that says we can master life if we only have enough education, charisma or perseverance, when we feel empty of any sense of self worth or even when we are full of ourselves, God meets us. God embraces us in loving arms of mercy, not because of anything we have done or not done, but because of who God is and what God has done for us for Jesus' sake.

Who could have imagined an improvisational God who not only would become one of us in Jesus, but would go every place we go, even to death, so that God might graciously meet us and embrace us with the gift of new life in Christ.

This is the base chord of the fullness of grace upon grace that God spoke to you in baptism. No, God more than spoke to you. God bound God's self to you in God's word of

¹ Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) 14.

² Jim Klobuchar, *Pursued by Grace, A Newspaperman's Own Story*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998) 113.

promise, saying, “You are my child. I will love you steadfastly for Jesus’ sake. I will forgive you mercifully for Jesus’ sake. On the last day, I will raise you up to new life eternally.” As a seal of your inheritance, you have been given the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

When we stand as confirmands and affirm our baptism, we are testifying to the base chords of the life of faith. So I ask you, “Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism: to live among God’s faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth? I do, and I ask God to help and guide me.”³ There they are, the base chords of the baptized life, lived in the fullness of God’s grace upon grace. A communal life, not a private spirituality. A sacramental life in covenant. A life of everyday evangelism. A diaconal life of serving our neighbors. A life of working for justice and peace.

So we improvise on these base chords. We riff as individuals as Resurrection Lutheran Church and as the ELCA. And our riffing will cause us to become involved in the struggle for immigration reform and to work tirelessly for peace in the Middle East, peace in our country, our streets and our homes. And our riffing will cause us to celebrate joyfully the wonders of God’s grace and, yes, that grace will free us to ask questions that transcend the moment.

Hear the good news of God’s base chords: the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth and we have received the fullness of his grace upon grace. Now let our improvising begin!

³ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2006) 236.