

Matthew 3:13-17 The Baptism of Jesus

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. **14** John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” **15** But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. **16** And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. **17** And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved,[d] with whom I am well pleased.”

John 1:1-9, 14-18 The Word Became Flesh

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4** in him was life,[a] and the life was the light of all people. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. **7** He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. **8** He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. **9** The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.[b]

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son,[d] full of grace and truth. **15** (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) **16** From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. **17** The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. **18** No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,[e] who is close to the Father’s heart,[f] who has made him known.

Grace Upon Grace

God was there to hear **your** borning cry.

God was there when you took your very first breath.

God was there from the very beginning.

Today is the day that we celebrate the very beginning of Jesus's ministry. We remember the dramatic outward sign for all to witness that God's power rested upon Jesus. As Jesus comes up out of the Jordan the sky breaks open, the Spirit of God descends like a dove, and God's voice claims Jesus as his own beloved Son with whom he is well pleased. Today's reading of the baptism of Jesus is the story of the dawning of Jesus's ministry. It is the very beginning!

Today is also the day that we remember the dawning of our own faith journeys. We come to remember **our** baptisms - we come to notice the way that God is at work in our lives now and has been ever since our borning cry. We come to give thanks to God for this amazing gift of grace.

You see, God's grace is a gift that accompanies us on all of our life's journeys, at our baptism and across the whole of our lives. God's grace draws us more and more into a transformational and life-saving relationship. I love the way John Wesley the founder of United Methodism spoke about God's work in our lives. Wesley said:

Salvation is "extended to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory"

(The Scripture Way of Salvation, Sermon 43).

God's unconditional love, God's grace, is extended to all of creation from the beginning of our lives until the end of our lives -- from the very dawn of grace in our souls until the end when we see the fullness of God's grace in the face of Jesus!

In John 1:16 this life-long work of God in our lives is described as grace upon grace. God continues to pour out grace upon grace upon grace in our lives from the beginning until the end. And this grace upon grace is given to us through the light of the world, Jesus Christ; and it is this light, it is Christ, whom the gospel of John describes as the **true** light that enlightens the **whole** world (John 1:9).

Today, as we think about beginnings, I hope to focus your attention particularly on that first dawning of the light of Christ in our lives--the very beginning. John Wesley has termed this first light of God's grace as preventing or prevenient grace -- this is the grace that comes before we are even aware of it. This grace is all the drawings of the father; it is the conviction of the Spirit on our souls. This grace is God's initiation of a relationship with us -- **we** don't initiate it, **God** does: pursuing us and wooing us and seeking us to be a part of God's family. The purpose of prevenient grace is to make it possible for us to even respond to God; it is this grace that enables us to hear the Gospel and come to faith.

Wesley described this grace upon grace as the light of God increasing more and more in our lives. And as we open our eyes to more and more of the light, we are able to see better. Our relationship with God grows deeper, and we become more like Christ. This grace that Wesley named prevenient is the very dawning of this light of Christ--it is the very beginning of our faith journey.

Now please know that this idea of God's grace accompanying us throughout our lives is not just an idea, though, it is real life -- it is part of our daily experience. You see, just as God proclaimed his own Son beloved, God proclaims the same about each of us. But we don't always respond like we ought to -- like the borning cry song says, don't we all at some point run off to find where the demons dwell. But when **we** turn away and **our** love fails, God remains faithful. God is a God who never gives up on any of us, and because we are a people who like to find all kinds of ways to avoid God, there is no limit to the creative ways that God tries to get our attention through prevenient grace. I can look back on my life and recognize a few of the ways that God works.....

- through people in my life,
- through experiences both good and bad,
- and through the church, the body of believers.

I can see now that God's grace has accompanied me on all my life's journeys even from the very beginning, even from my borning cry. For example, I am thankful for my parents who made sure I knew God right from the beginning. I was baptized as an infant, and I experienced the outward sign of God's grace working within me from the time I was a few weeks' old. I

attended church most every Sunday. As a child and teenager, I heard the Gospel proclaimed. I learned to pray. I received the sacrament of Holy Communion. God's grace was ever-present even though I didn't really understand the true power of the living God in my life.

I marched along on my life's journey without recognizing the light of Christ, though. I went off to college at Arkansas Tech in Russellville and still attended church every now and then even while in college. Ed and I married during college, and then an event happened in my life that hind-sight shows was an experience of God's prevenient grace. It was my senior year of college when our first son Jonathan was born five weeks prematurely by c-section. He weighed four pounds and was taken to neonatal intensive care in Little Rock. His birthday was December 1 of my senior year of college. December 1. The week before finals – in my senior year of college. I had gone through the whole semester, but there was no way I would get credit if I wasn't able to complete my final exams. I needed to take a final exam in Shakespeare – which I somehow managed to do after I got home. The other obstacle to finishing the semester was social dance-it was a PE class where we learned the waltz and the fox trot – things like that. Dancing is not really something you want to do after surgery. And so I called my professor – she was a tiny little lady Professor Martha Nan Dowell. And she said, “You just call me when you feel better and you can come do a dance for me for your grade.” But before I could feel better and do the dance, I received my grades – she had forgiven the requirement, and she gave me an A. She didn't have to do that – I had no special relationship with her -- but she did.

Our next semester was our final one – all we had to do was a little class work and then student teaching for the both of us. But the problem was we were poor, we had a newborn premature baby, and we had no childcare. So we asked the dean of the education department if we could student teach in our hometown of Harrison so that my Grandmother could take care of Jonathan. Now Arkansas Tech's policy was that they would place you within 20 miles so that they could regularly supervise you, and Harrison was 100 miles away – up curvy highway 7. But Dean Fleniken agreed to let us both go to Harrison, and he agreed that he would personally make the drive to supervise us. Looking back on it, I realize he didn't have to do that. He was a stranger to us, and he showed amazing kindness and love.

It all worked out great, and we kept moving on with the journey of our lives. But the problem was, my journey did not involve a real relationship with Christ. I started a career as an English teacher. I moved around the state following my football coach husband. When our second son Mark was born, I started to attend church regularly.

But I didn't really get it. I mean, I really didn't get it. I was just putting in my time on Sunday mornings out of habit. Even though I had officially been confirmed as a member of my church and learned all the head knowledge about God, I never recognized that the Holy Spirit was calling me and drawing me nearer in order to totally transform my life!

The journey continued without Jesus. I started career number two as a lawyer and ten year later found myself living in Russellville again – back to my old college town. I just so happened to wander into First United Methodist Church in Russellville, and that is when God began to work miracle after miracle in my life. I connected with the church in such a powerful way that it was like the light was slowly coming on, and I began to see things in a totally new way. I was starting to feel some really weird things. I was starting to like going to church. And then I got a phone call that changed everything for me. A stranger named Joy called me. She told me she had seen me in church, and that God had told her to call and invite me to a Bible study at her house. I had never in my life heard of God talking to people, and I thought that was really strange that God would talk to anyone and especially that God would talk to a stranger about me. But I thought the study sounded fun.

I did go to that Bible study, and it totally transformed my life. I couldn't get enough of God's word. Through studying the living word of God, I learned that God wants a relationship with me – God wanted my heart and my soul, not just my mind. God wanted me to learn to love the Lord My God with all my heart, soul and mind. In fact, God wanted to come along with me on the journey of my life.

And looking back on it all, I learned that God will do anything – in pursuit of you, including talking to strangers like Joy if you aren't listening. My relationship with God in my younger years only amounted to attending church – showing up, saying the right prayers, listening to and receiving information. It was a system, not a relationship – show up every Sunday morning and go home. Do your duty. My system didn't change how I thought or acted

on Monday morning or even on Sunday afternoon. Even though I went to church virtually every week, I didn't really know Jesus. I was in my 30s before I ever figured it out. But God never gave up on me. God's grace was beside me through the whole journey shining more and more of the light on my life until I could see it!

God will not give up drawing you closer until your final breath!

And God will not give up on your children or your grandchildren or your spouse or your friend.

God will use people as agents of grace -- to shower you with grace upon grace—to care for you and sacrifice for you in order to draw you a little closer to Christ. God will use events both positive and negative to awaken you to God's love. God will use the body of Christ --- the church --- to get your attention – through scripture, preaching, worship... through music, prayer, Holy Communion and small groups - these are all are instruments of God's prevenient grace – they all draw us closer to Christ—they all help us to see the truth of God's love. It is God's Holy Spirit that is working in such creative and personal ways -- convicting us of the need to accept this amazing grace, this free gift of salvation that God offers.

God's grace really is most amazing. All along God was drawing me closer, and I just couldn't see it. And here's how I know it to be true. A few weeks after I started going to First United Methodist Church in Russellville, I started seeing this little lady in the worship service. And you will never guess who it was! It was Martha Nan Dowell, the PE professor who gave me an A in social dance ten years earlier. I learned that she was a long-time member of that church. And I saw her overwhelming act of kindness to me when I was a new mom in a different light. I could see that her act of kindness was an act of Christian kindness.

Not only that but not too long after I moved back to Russellville I became a member of a small Bible study group which met at different people's houses. It just so happened that Dean Fleniken's wife was a member of the group, and we met at her house for Bible study often. I learned that Dean Fleniken who had sacrificed for us during our student teaching was a devout and faithful follower of Jesus. His act of kindness was not simply done out of a sense of duty or ordinary concern, but I could see ten years' later that it was done with the love of Christ.

These people and events in my life took on a whole new meaning down the road. I firmly believe these people were instruments of God's love whom God specifically put in my path. These were people God put in my path to help me raise that tiny premature baby into a faithful man. These were people God put in my path to help bring me to real faith. These were people God put into my path for my own protection and my own salvation, and these people played a role in bringing me to **this place this day**.

The other thing I've come to realize is that we never know when through the power of God's grace, we might ourselves be a Martha Nan Dowell or a Dean Fleniken or a Joy. We, too, are given the chance to be the instruments of God's prevenient grace in someone else's life. We begin to live out our baptismal vows -- we begin to become disciples who show others the light of Christ.

Today, may you know that God was there to hear **your** borning cry.

But God loves you too much for that to be the whole story.

You see God also rejoices on the day you are baptized, and walks beside you during your childhood. God even has the audacity to stick beside us when we wander off to find where demons dwell. God is with us in our middle years to guide us. God is with us when we are old. And when we shut our weary eyes, God is going to be there to greet us with one more surprise.

You see the grace of God--

the **overwhelming,**

unconditional

and incomprehensible love of God--is always with us.

Whether we recognize it..... or whether we are still blind to it;

whether we accept it..... or reject it.

So today, O God, today we are thankful for the presence of your never-ending grace in our lives. We can't believe you would call us your own. We are thankful for our baptisms. We are thankful for the people who have been instruments of your grace in our lives. Grant that our eyes would be open more and more every day to the light of Christ. And may your Holy Spirit empower and inspire us to go from here to be instruments of grace in the lives of others. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I Was There To Hear Your Borne Cry

"I was there to hear your borne cry,
I'll be there when you are old.

I rejoiced the day you were baptized,
to see your life unfold.

I was there when you were but a child,
with a faith to suit you well;

In a blaze of light you wandered off
to find where demons dwell."

"When you heard the wonder of the Word

I was there to cheer you on;
You were raised to praise the living Lord,
to whom you now belong.

If you find someone to share your time
and you join your hearts as one,
I'll be there to make your verses rhyme
from dusk 'till rising sun."

In the middle ages of your life,
not too old, no longer young,
I'll be there to guide you through the night,
complete what I've begun.

When the evening gently closes in,
and you shut your weary eyes,
I'll be there as I have always been
with just one more surprise."

"I was there to hear your borning cry,
I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized,
to see your life unfold."