

The Fourth Sunday of Lent March 14, 2021

After high school, Paul wasn't sure what career he wanted to pursue. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to go to college at all. So, he decided to get a job at the local factory and work until he figured out what he wanted to do with his life. Paul found working in a factory boring and unfulfilling. But, now he had bills to pay. Though he wanted to find another job, he needed the income. Day by day, he felt more and more trapped by his situation. His life had become an endless cycle of working from Monday through Friday and partying on weekends.

One day Paul noticed a bumper sticker on the car in front of him. It said "Grace Happens". Though he didn't know what it meant, he was intrigued by it and couldn't get the saying out of his mind.

The more he thought about the saying, the more he looked at the situation he was in. Nothing was getting any better for him. He was just as unsure about what he wanted for his life as he was the day he graduated from high school. He felt lost and afraid. He knew he had to make a change but he didn't know where to start.

He decided to go to church on Sunday, that's when a light went on in his mind. All of a sudden, it became clear to him what he needed to do. From there, things began to change for him.

"Grace Happens"

Another Paul had the same experience, but in a more dramatic way. He is St Paul who, on the way to persecuting Christians in Damascus, had an encounter with the Risen Jesus who interrupted his plans and changed his life forever. Instead of being the great persecutor of Christians, he became the greatest missionary for Jesus who ever lived. Grace "happened" in St Paul's life, and the world has never been the same.

In today's second reading, St Paul writes, "even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] brought us to life with Christ - by grace you have been saved." Our salvation is a free gift from God. He doesn't give it to us as a reward for any good we have done. In fact, it is because we are sinners that He comes to rescue us. There is nothing we can do to earn it. It is a simple gift of His love. The word "grace" comes from the Latin word "gratia" which means "free" and communicates this idea of God's love as a rich expression of His mercy to us.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life." There are many ways that God could have saved us from our sins.

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But He chose to send His only Son. He chose to surrender what was most precious to Him to make it clear to us just how great His love for us was.

So when the world seems most dark, when we are most lost, when things seem as though they couldn't get any worse, that is when "grace happens". That is when God steps in and makes the way clear for us, giving us the strength to go forward, and putting within our reach what had once seemed impossible.

As with any gift, however, we still have to accept it and put it to use. We all received the gift of faith through our baptism. We can choose to walk in the light of that faith or put it away somewhere in order to follow the world's way. God is at work in our lives through His Holy Spirit inspiring us to choose the path of light that leads to life. We can listen and follow His guidance or ignore it and go our own way. If we walk in God's way, it will lead to life. If we choose our own way, it will lead to confusion, darkness, and grief. But, whatever choice we make, God will not stop loving us. He will not stop trying to disrupt our plans in hopes that we'll finally get smart and change.

God is not watching our lives from afar. He is intimately involved with us every second of every day. He is close to us. He is near to us whenever we call upon Him. We don't have to do anything to get His attention. Rather, it is He who is trying to get our attention. We can count on Him, especially when we are most in need. Like a loving Father, He will always give us what we need. His grace will "happen" in our lives when we most need it and often times when we least expect it.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life." God offers His only Son to us today in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Simple bread and wine will be transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ given to us, free of charge, to nourish our souls.

This free gift of God's love is renewed at every Mass, as we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus. Let us receive this gift, then, with gratitude, reverence, and awe. And just as we've received God's love freely, let us give it freely to others, so that God's grace can "happen" in the lives of all that we meet.