

Grace Upon Grace
The First Sunday after Christmas
December 31, 2023
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

At age 30 in 1972, Aretha Franklin's life was at a crossroads. She had achieved the pinnacle of international fame as the Queen of Soul, Rhythm and Blues. She had come a long way from the home that was her birthplace just a few minutes south of here. But Aretha was still scarred from her parents' separation when she was a young child, and from her mother's death when she was nine years old. Aretha had also just ended an 8-year marriage in which she suffered domestic abuse, and she now faced life as a single mother, trying to balance parenthood with a thriving music career. She felt the constant pressure that goes along with stardom of producing the next hit, of selling out the next concert venue.

In the midst of all this success and turmoil, Aretha took an unusual step. Her next album would be gospel music and would be titled 'Amazing Grace.' And she would record it not in a studio, but in a church – a church that would take her back to her roots of when she was a shy, withdrawn child who found her faith and her joy by singing in choirs. She arranged to sing over two nights at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles. Aretha insisted that the church not be simply a backdrop to the recording sessions. Instead, it was important to her that her music be a part of real-life worship services, complete with a congregation and a choir.

The Reverend James Cleveland served as the officiant. In the middle of the first of the two worship services, as Aretha sang her stirring rendition of 'Amazing Grace,' even Pastor Cleveland put his head in his hands and cried uncontrollably. As she ended the hymn, Aretha herself teared up and had to sit down as the choir finished. She had been so touched by the words of the hymn, brought to life by her own gifts and the gifts of her fellow musicians that she experienced something akin to a rebirth that night.

Today's Gospel passage, the prologue of John, hearkens us back to the creation story in Genesis with the words, 'In the beginning.' We discover that Jesus is not only the one to whom birth is given at Christmas, but he is also the life-giving Word who has helped

midwife the birth all of creation from the very beginning. And now as the Word becomes flesh in Jesus, he gives new birth to us as God's children.

How does he do this? We learn that from the fullness of Jesus, we all receive grace upon grace. Grace upon grace.

But what is grace? Many have defined it as unmerited favor. And while that is very true, the language of 'unmerited favor' still comes out of the transactional mindset that is so often our default setting in dealing with the world around us.

Grace is much more organic than that. I wonder if grace could be better described as the warm waters of birth that nurture us in the womb, that bathe us in unconditional love, and then launch us into new light and life, no matter what our age.

Grace is a gift we receive. We are not in control of it. We are simply embraced by it. To live a grace-filled life is to live a vulnerable life. It is a willingness to go to thin places, whether they be geographic or whether they be deep, hidden corners within our minds and hearts, where we are open to God's grace however it appears or however it sounds.

For Aretha Franklin, that place was New Temple Missionary Baptist Church on a couple of January nights. At the worship service on the second night, Aretha's father, the Reverend C.L. Franklin, was there. You could tell he was honored to be invited. You could tell he was very proud of his daughter. During one of the hymns, he walked over to Aretha and wiped the sweat from her brow. Despite the many complications in their relationship, that was a moment of simple loving grace – a parent tenderly wiping sweat from the brow of his child, a child receiving his act of love with the warmth of a smile.

John Newton had been a slave trader who later became a slave himself. He was a tortured prisoner, who later became a priest and abolitionist. Newton wrote 'Amazing Grace' as a hymn for a worship service on New Year's Day, 1773. It was meant to illustrate the story of King David in the First Book of Chronicles, Chapter 17, in which David reflects on God's past grace, present grace, and the hope of future grace in his journey and in the journey of God's people.

John Newton identified with David in that he had made many twists and turns in his life, and had made a number of mistakes along the way. If we're honest, we identify with both David and John Newton. Maybe that's why this hymn still resonates after 251 years.

The Black Church taught us that ‘Amazing Grace’ is a much more communal hymn than we think. It is believed the last verse was added later by Black churches. Notice the pronoun changes from the first verse,

‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like *me*. *I* once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now *I* see’

to the last verse,

‘When *we*’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, *we*’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when *we*’d first begun.’

Grace is imparted to us by God not only as individuals, but as a community. We are being collectively reborn as the light and life of Jesus comes inside us as a body, and we experience his warmth, his growth, and his challenge.

Grace is meant to be received, but it is also meant to be shared. After a violent year in our world and in our city, we at Calvary are to listen and look for ways to be the midwives of Christ’s light and life to all troubled places, beginning with those right here in our city.

The fact that Amazing Grace was written as a New Year’s Day hymn should give us all hope. God is giving us a new beginning, a clean slate, a fresh start. Jesus is embracing us with a new year filled with an overflowing abundance of his love, filled with his grace upon grace.

Like Aretha Franklin and John Newton, we are blessed with a time of rebirth to receive God’s amazing grace, which will forever be the sweetest of all sounds. *Amen*.