

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**January 2, 2011**  
**“Grace Upon Grace”**  
**John 1:1-4, 10-18**

Cross-cultural communication is never easy. Cross-cultural communication is not just between Americans and Chinese, or Americans and French; it can be between the Americans and the British, who are, as George Bernard Shaw put it, two people separated by a common language. Parents talking to their children involves cross-cultural communication, as does Steelers’ fans talking to Eagles’ fans.

The opening to John’s gospel is an example of cross-cultural communication. Imagine an ancient amphitheater filled with two groups of people. On one side are Jews, sons and daughters of Abraham, followers of the law of Moses. On the other side are Greeks, men and women of the empire of Alexander the Great, believers in a polytheistic, many-gods religion. Both groups accept that the world was created by a divine being. For the Jews, this Creator is revealed through the Torah, the sacred word that explains to them how life started and how it should be lived. For the Greeks with their philosophy, the Creative Force was understood as the Logos, the Primal Word, and rational principle by which everything came to be and continues to exist.

In this amphitheater, Jews and Greeks listened as a Christian speaker read to them the opening of John’s gospel: *In the beginning was Logos, the Word*. Both groups nodded in agreement. This creative force, Creator God, was in the beginning and is the life of the world. Having bridged that cultural divide, the Christian speaker then sought to connect the three cultures. *This Word, Logos, became flesh and lived among us*. The Greeks had many stories of the gods coming down from Olympus to mingle in the lives of mortals, so their ears were receptive to this tale of God becoming incarnate. And for the Jewish listeners, the speakers’ word choice was significant. To say “the Word lived among us,” he used a verb that literally means “pitched his tent among us.” Upon hearing that, the Jewish listeners nudged one another; because back in the days of Moses, God was said to have pitched God’s tent among the people of Israel. This tent was symbolized by the tabernacle, the covering over the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments as they were carried through the wilderness. And now this Christian claimed that God’s tent was again pitched in the midst of the people of Palestine. An amazing thought; they wanted to hear more!

So in a few phrases, cross-cultural communication occurred between three groups. But now imagine that there was someone else in that amphitheater. Along with the Jews, Greeks and the Christian speaker, up on the top tier were two Pitt University college students, holding their iPads, texting their friends and searching frantically for a good WiFi signal. They too were listening to this presentation. *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God; and the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth*. Now, to achieve cross-cultural communication with this new group would be much harder.

One Pitt student was an anthropology major. He was quite comfortable with stories of ethnic history, of Jews wandering from Egypt to Palestine, formalizing their faith around campfires on the way to their Promised Land. He was also comfortable with Greek history, tales of sailors and sea-traders bringing back statues of foreign gods with their cargos of wine and fabric from the known world. The second Pitt student was a philosophy major. She was comfortable with the language of Logos, monotheism, polytheism, and religious faith. But so far, nothing spoken by the Christian speaker has connected with these college kids. (This continues to be a problem in churches today.) Talk of God and Logos and incarnation just seems like a listing of concepts suitable for mid-term exams.

But then the students heard an interesting comment. The speaker said this Word made flesh was in the world and the world came into being through him, yet the world knew him not. *“He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him.”* In the language of Facebook, his own people didn’t “friend” him. In the language of politics, his own party rejected his candidacy. His cable show was cancelled; his movie script was rejected; his voice in the chattering blogosphere was silenced. Now this was something with which the students could identify. This moved the conversation from philosophy to psychology. They knew lots of people who chose not to act on their faith. They knew that lots of churches with declining membership. And they knew how lots of young adults and not-so-young adults questioned whether this ancient message from ancient amphitheaters had anything to say to them today.

Too often sermons stop about there. Some sermons are simply lectures on the beliefs of ancient Jews and Greeks and what we can learn from them. Others are Psychology 101 lectures about how people freely and foolishly reject what is in their best interest, including the God of the Christian faith. So to go farther today with this sermon, we need to leave the amphitheater. We will take one Jew, one Greek, the Christian speaker, and the two college students and transport them all to a coffee shop in Pittsburgh.

Now imagine the group is there in a corner booth, and the Christian speaker sincerely wants to communicate with these representatives of three different cultures. Just at that moment, the college students’ laptops freeze up. The cursors won’t move; the screens are stuck and they’ll have to hit Control-Alt-Delete to re-boot their computers. The Christian speaker notices this and decides to use it to get his point across. He reads again part of the prologue to John’s gospel: *This Word, this Logos made Flesh, came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of human will, but of God.* The Jewish and Greek listeners pondered these words sympathetically, but the college students looked skeptical. The message was clear—the Word came to us, calling us and naming us children of God. The movement is from above to below, from heaven to earth. The Christian faith insists that who we are, our deepest identity, is not something that arises from us—from human volition or human psychology or human intellect, but rather it is something born of God’s

will, God's ordering of life, and God's spirit. And that is problematic. For to accept that means giving up something—giving up a personal sense of primacy.

So the speaker pointed to their frozen computers and asked the students to consider the default setting for their laptops. When the computers blink on and come back to life, what will they first see? When the computer functions properly, is it orderly or arbitrary? Is it something inherently good or destructive? And by way of analogy, what is their default mode? When they first open their eyes each morning, what is the default mode into which they gain consciousness? Is life ordered or arbitrary, good or destructive?

The students paused, considering the questions, yet unsure how to respond. They have seen enough of life to believe that it is complex yet ordered, not arbitrary. And the ordering appears to be generally trustworthy and for our good, not for evil. But too often, college students and people of all ages stop right there. Like the ancient Greeks, they say all this faith stuff is just philosophy, trying to make sense of the vastness of life around us. So here's where the Jewish presence is important, for their story of the Torah, the Ten Commandments and the prophets in the wilderness, insists that this faith philosophy only makes sense in and through the flesh and blood lives of people. Imperfect people: Kings and slaves, saints and sinners, yet real people nonetheless, whose default mode is to affirm both that God is and God is with us.

The cross-cultural communication was sinking in. The Greek, the Jew, and most difficult of all, the college students were seeing themselves in this story of heavenly Word and earthly incarnation. But the students broke the silence and spoke for the group: "How should we respond to this news? This talk of God, the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. In him was life. Through him is the power to be children of God. Does this news give us hope or should it fill us with fear? Can it bring us together or is it meant to separate us in warring factions?" All three listened for the answer. To which the Christian speaker read one more verse: *From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.* (Jn 1:16) In our world of incompleteness, there is God who is completely full and glorious. In our world of artificial divisions and racism and fear, there is One who has come to all of us. And if we wonder whether this movement from heaven to earth is for good or for evil, this promise is sure and worthy of full acceptance: From God we receive grace upon grace.

Grace upon grace. In our family, we read a book during Advent that spoke about the glory of heaven being so overwhelming and full that it routinely spilled over and fell down to earth, of which wildflowers were one example of this extravagance. I love that image. Heaven spilling over to earth, showering upon us. That is not to pretend that the world is without pain and tears; it is only to say that those things are not the dominant reality. Grace upon grace: That is our default mode. That is the reality that greets us when we open our eyes each morning. That is the good news that embraces us when we welcome a New Year, even one as modern and skeptical and troubled yet full of possibility as 2011. Real cross-cultural communication begins with answering the question: Can I trust the good news you share? It means giving up my primacy in the world. It means walking by faith not sight. It means seeing, in an ancient story, a truth

that directly applies to my life now. The answer is for each listener to see the world as a place of “grace upon grace.” To trust a Creator God, Redeemer Christ, ever-moving and dancing Holy Spirit whose glory spills from heaven, fresh each day. And that is precisely John’s gospel gift for us this New Year.

AMEN