

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 1 January 2023**  
**Name of Jesus - Year A**

**1st Reading: *Numbers 6:22-27***

**Psalm: 8**

**2nd Reading: *Philippians 2:5-11***

**Gospel: *Luke 2:15-21***

**Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø***

In the name of the Father, ✚ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

About 30 years ago now, on our very first trip to England, we stayed at a cottage in the little town of Olney, in Buckinghamshire, about 60 miles north of London. [Here is a guidebook for Olney]

We liked this town so much that a few years later, when we moved to England, we chose to live in Olney for a couple of years when I worked in London. And we were members of the Anglican church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul that is shown on the cover of the guidebook. And when we lived there, Coral volunteered at the Cowper and Newton Museum on the Market Square.

This museum commemorated two men who had lived in Olney more than 200 years earlier, who had become quite famous. The first was a poet, William Cowper, and the second was his friend, John Newton, who became the Curate, basically the Vicar, at the church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. And one of the things that these two friends did was to compete with each other writing hymns.

One of William Cowper's hymns, which is not in our current hymnal, but whether you have ever sung it or not, I'm sure you've heard its first line: "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform". So any time you ever hear someone saying that "God moves in a mysterious way", they are quoting William Cowper.

John Newton, on the other hand, was a very unlikely candidate to be the Vicar of Olney. In his younger years he was what the British call "a nasty piece of work". Newton's father had been a ship's captain, so John had also joined the navy. But he was so nasty that he cursed his superior officers, cursed everyone around him, cursed the Bible and cursed God. He was so insubordinate that at one point he ran away from his ship, and when he was tracked down and captured he was put in chains and whipped.

Eventually, he left the navy and became a slave trader. He captured slaves in Africa and transported them to Jamaica, where he sold them.

Then one day, there was a terrible storm at sea, and he just blurted out: "God have mercy on us". Well, God did have mercy on them and the boat was saved from the storm, and he began to think about that, and very slowly he became a Christian, and then a very dedicated Christian. He gave up the slave trade, wrote a book about his early sins, and became a popular preacher. Eventually he was ordained in the Church of England and was assigned to be the curate, the vicar, at Olney, people would come from miles around to hear him preach, and in time he helped William Wilburforce to outlaw and end the slave trade in England.

As I said, he became friends with William Cowper, and the two of them competed in writing hymns. And the reason I am telling you this story today, is that 250 years ago today, on the 1st of January, 1773, one of his hymns was sung for the very first time, in the church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Olney. That hymn is "Amazing Grace". We will be singing the entire hymn as Newton originally wrote it in a few minutes, but before we sing it, let's take a look at what it says, especially in light of Newton's own life.

We all know how it begins: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." Newton wasn't just being poetic here. If anyone might be called a wretch, it was certainly Newton himself, and he knew it. And yet God's grace had come even to him and had saved him. We may not feel quite as wretched as Newton - or perhaps some of us do when we consider our own sins, and yet God's grace has come to each one of us through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus - whose name we proclaim today: Jesus, whose name means "the Saviour", and who as Paul tells us in his letter to the Philippians this morning, was himself God, and yet became one of us, became human, and through his obedient death on the cross, became our saviour - saving us from our sins, saving us to be children of God, enabling us to renounce and reject our sins, and live instead in love toward God and toward each other.

Newton's hymn is a wonderful statement of our own Lutheran theology, the cornerstone of which is that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And indeed there are some interesting parallels between John Newton and Martin Luther. Newton was terrified during a storm and called on God to have mercy. Luther, too, was terrified during a storm, riding on a horse, and vowed that if God would have mercy on him he would become a monk. And like Newton, after this experience Luther struggled with his own sense of guilt over his sins, until he read the Bible and discovered that God gives us grace to save us from our sins.

And so Newton could write (as Luther had similarly written) that "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."

Yet it is the second verse of Amazing Grace that perhaps strikes the most Lutheran tone of all: “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.” What Luther had found in his own struggles with sin, and in reading the Bible, is that God’s word to us, and his grace, first show us our sin, and if we truly understand our sins, we are terrified by them. Luther uses the word “terror” to describe his own sense of sin; Newton says “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear”. But if God’s Word and his grace make us terrified, this is to lead us to Jesus our Savior, to know that only in Jesus, and through his grace, can we be saved from our sins.

“’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.” We are redeemed through the grace of Jesus, our sins are forgiven, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit we are now able to abandon those sins and live a life of grace. We hear this good news in the Word of God. We receive God’s salvation in our baptism as our sin is washed away. And we are fed with Jesus’ body and blood in communion, so that we are able to go out and live the life God has called us to live, born anew through God’s amazing grace.

Amen!

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