

# Reflections

magazine

From The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas

Spring/Summer 2016



GRACE

*How Shall We Respond?*





Spring/Summer 2016

**Using this issue as a resource for further study:**

Because every issue of *Reflections* explores a single topic, the magazine lends itself to further study by individuals as well as small groups or Sunday morning classes.

The purpose of *Reflections* is not to give answers but rather to incite inquisitiveness. The writers and editor of *Reflections* hope the magazine's contents will inspire further exploration and reflection on each topic, especially as the topics relate to daily life. Look for "For further reflection" suggestions at the end of each article. For additional resources on spiritual formation, see pages 24-26.

We invite your feedback. If you have comments on this issue or suggestions for future issues, send a note to Marjorie George, editor, email below.

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**Reflections magazine is published by**

Department of Communications  
Episcopal Diocese of West Texas  
P. O. Box 6885  
San Antonio, Texas 78209  
[www.dwtx.org](http://www.dwtx.org)

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**Read the magazine online. This entire issue and individual articles in this issue, as well as previous issues, are at**

[www.reflections-dwtx.org](http://www.reflections-dwtx.org)

# In this issue

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## Empty-chair grace

by Marjorie George

The first question was: “For what are you grateful?” The second question was: “What do you most fear?”

Five of us had gathered in the late afternoon for an overnight retreat at chapel house on the grounds of the Bishop Jones Center. After dinner, we had moved to one of the bedrooms in the old house where we were staying; the room has been turned into something of a small, cozy parlor appointed with some easy chairs, a large ottoman, and an old wardrobe that holds liturgical vestments.

We had pulled the easy chairs into a circle such that we all could put our feet up on the ottoman in the center, and we settled in for some thoughtful reflection.

One of us posed two questions – “For what are you grateful?” and “What do you most fear?” Rather than deal with them, my lazy mind began to wander around the room, noting the desk under the window that holds a guest registry book, and wondering how old the wardrobe really is. One of us had had to leave early, and now my eyes landed on her empty chair in our circle.

I took in the presence of the empty chair merely as an observation: “Huh, empty chair.” But in that split second before my brain could catalog what my eyes had perceived, I recognized possibility: What is the significance of the empty chair? Would I see it as the “empty chairs at empty tables” grief of *Les Misérables*? Or would I liken it to the Jewish tradition of having an empty chair and an empty cup at the Passover table in the hope that Elijah will come to occupy it and announce the coming of the Messiah?

A larger question emerged: Metaphorically, would I invite hopeful gratitude to take up space in my head and heart? Or would I give over that space to the memory of past wounds that threaten the edges of my future?

The word gratitude comes from the Latin *gratus*, which has the same etymological root as the word grace. When I am grateful, I must acknowledge the presence of grace.

In my car I always carry two canvas sports chairs — the kind that fold up and fit neatly into a bag you can sling over your shoulder. Because you just never know when you might come across a grandchild on a football field or playing soccer, and you ought to be prepared to sit right down and take it all in. Maybe I should add a third chair in the same anticipation of grace.

Perfect love casts our fear, says 1 John (4:18). I would guess perfect gratitude makes way for grace.

In this issue of *Reflections* our writers reflect on their own experiences of recognizing God's grace. Sometimes that's in suffering, sometimes in the visit of a determined dog, sometimes when Easter eggs produce more than chocolate candy.

We invite your own reflection of God's grace in your life and your consideration of how to respond to it in gratefulness.

Find an easy chair and enjoy this issue.



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**Responding to grace**

# Grace Reflected

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## *Grace is about noticing what God is doing and how we are being changed by it.*

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by the Rev. Carol Morehead

**G**race . . . what in the world is grace? I used to wonder that when I was growing up, hearing the word mentioned so often in church. I had some vague notions about grace as a theological concept, but what really was grace?

When I got to graduate school in the 80's, studying theology, I read a lot about grace. I learned what a pivotal concept it was to so many different religious thinkers – Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Bonhoeffer

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– and I found myself more and more uncomfortable as grace was articulated within the Christian world. Total depravity, cheap grace, sanctified grace, actual grace – I felt lost in the words, distanced from grace and knowing what it was. In the tradition of my childhood, grace was a part of the "plan of salvation," and it felt like just another step in a big plan on some divine whiteboard somewhere. And I was left wanting by all this, thirsting and hungering after something more when Christians talked about God's grace.

As I moved further into my studies, I discovered the Orthodox view of grace often articulated by the desert fathers and mothers and the Eastern church. Here, grace is found in the Holy Mysteries, the uncreated energies of God in which we participate. Through God's actions we are shaped and formed in the divine image. Rather than beginning with our sin and corruption and our intellectual assent to concepts about God, the focus becomes who God is and how our deepest self is made in God's image. Grace is God's way of drawing us back to ourselves, back to God's very self.

So I let go – of all the definitions, of the words, of the concepts, and tried to just dwell. Listen. Watch. Allow the Spirit to lead me. In the quiet of my soul, something wonderful began to happen. I began to experience grace, to be aware of the amazing movement of God within my world, through unexpected people and in surprising places.

As my inner world shifted, I began to look back at my life. And I found lovely examples of grace – the teenager who used to read the Bible with me, a third-grader, under the bleachers at softball games; the older man at church who was always there and always offered a caring word to the 16-year-old me who was searching; the youth minister's wife whose gentle, steady presence and open heart gave me a space to ask questions with her when I couldn't with others; the college professor who opened her home to me because my parents lived out of the country; the women's Bible study group who loved me by helping unpack the house when we moved with a newborn baby and my husband had to work long hours at the hospital; the stranger who saw me crying in the airport when I flew home after my mother's death and simply said they were praying for me, no questions asked.

This list could go on and on, because my eyes were opened to what grace really is – the living, incarnational love of God lavished on me. No matter what. Regardless of what I did – or didn't – do. Because of who I am – a beloved child of God.

Once I actually experienced grace, I became open to being grace to others, not because I am trying but rather because God is more and more showing up in and through my life. I came to realize that, while we try to articulate what grace is in our words and concepts, grace is always incarnational. Grace is the lived experience of God's love in our lives. When we – I – realize God's love is free and abundant, when I am filled up, I see others with new eyes. The way I treat others is not dependent on their actions, but rather on God's love for them, on seeing the face of Christ in them. It is what our baptismal vows call us to do – to seek and serve Christ in all persons.

Grace is about what God is doing and how we are changed by it. Over and over, God shows grace through the people we meet – every day, in so many places, in big and small ways. Grace stopped being "out there" for me, and became "in here." As we experience God's grace, more and more our lives mirror God's grace.

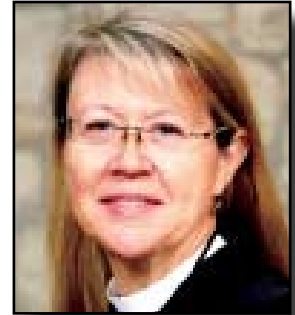
Niketas Stethatos, an 11th century monk at Constantinople, said this:

If you seek after God with all your heart  
and all your strength,  
then the virtues of your soul and body  
will turn you into a mirror  
of the image of God within.  
You will be so merged in God,  
and God so merged in you,  
that each will endlessly repose in the  
other.

*R*

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### For further reflection:

When did you first become aware of the concept of grace?

Has your definition of grace changed over the years?

As you think back, who have been the people who were examples of grace for you? Why is that so?

How would you define grace to an unchurched person?



**Responding to grace**

# Evening Walk

*When we are attentive, we see  
God's grace all around us.*





by the Rev. Lera Tyler

**A**lmost every evening, when the setting sun gets to the appropriate angle on the west end of our street, Henry — my middle-aged terrier — reminds me that it's time for our evening walk. This spring our walks have been delightful. Grass lies freshly cut in neighborhood yards and pastures. Down the road a bit is a street-side rose garden so heavily laden with fragrances that we smell it long before we pass by. Near the one end of the street, Interstate 10 crosses high over our heads. From April to September, swarms of swallows swoop under and around the bridge, like unleashed acrobats, and bats quietly roost, waiting for nightfall.

Less than 30 yards away, the Guadalupe River winds between tall cypress trees. The local water district has retention ponds just up the hill from our street. We frequently see herons and egrets flying overhead, seeking a meal from pond and river.

In the evenings, our quiet street hosts young people riding bikes and skateboards, multi-aged runners jogging quietly, and groups of older women out for a stroll.

Some people see the street merely as a short cut out of town, but they miss the details: the smell of roses, the squeals of children, and the teenager sailing over hurdles as she rides her beautiful mare. They drive by it all, unaware.

And the same can be true of grace.

We miss a lot of grace as we go about — driving, walking, dreaming, fretting, and worrying. We miss seeing the egrets, and roses, and faces of children playing their imaginary games. We miss the grace given in new and unexpected relationships and images and visions.

I know. Because on a bright, sun-filled day some 25 years ago, I almost missed it.

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● *Evening Walk*  
from page 11

*"The grace of God means something like: 'Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.'"*

- Frederick Buechner  
From *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (1993)

My husband and I were leading 45 Texans through southern England. We had been at it for 14 days: through historical sites, crowded restaurants, and many, many gift shops, and we had arrived at our last stop — Ely — home of one of the most magnificent cathedrals in Britain. But the August sun was hot in a country that did not consider air-conditioning a necessity, and I was exhausted.

Guides at this cathedral are especially enthusiastic about its 60-foot central lantern: a great octagonal tower framed with huge, oaken beams and faced with large glass windows filled with medieval tracery. My job, however, was to keep my eyes focused on our travelers, especially on one couple notorious for wandering off during lectures to visit souvenir shops.

On this occasion, when everyone else was on their way to the bus, they had again disappeared.

Looking for them and at my watch a third or fourth time, I thought resentfully, they've run off again! Why do they NOT follow our instructions?

So, I stood near the middle of the cathedral, frowning and straining, looking into one tourist cluster after another — first along the walls, then in the aisles, at the entrance, in the choir. My feet were tired; my head hurt. I was exhausted from two weeks of shepherding care-less sheep.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone in a dusky brown robe coming my way. He stopped directly in front of me and looked me straight in the eyes. I thought irritably, he's going to tell me to move because I am standing some place I shouldn't be!

Instead, he raised his arms shoulder-high, turned his palms up, looked up first and then directly into my eyes, and calmly but emphatically said, "Smile, my child. You are in the house of the LORD!"

I was indignant. He didn't know what I was dealing with! Nonetheless, my eyes involuntarily followed where his eyes had gone. We stood underneath the great lantern of Ely.

Even now, I can gather up the details. From 150 feet above us, a deluge of golden sunlight flooded

onto the warm stones at our feet. My eyes followed sun-stream downward — through the lacy tracery, down the delicate carving on the columns, over the altar linen, and onto the polished stone and marble floor at my feet. The brightness illuminated ground that had been crossed by men and women seeking refuge, holiness, and peace for almost 900 years.

And just then, nothing mattered, nothing at all, but that enormous light bathing me in its brilliant glory and peace.

I've learned that we bypass so much grace. We fall into arrogance, or indifference, or self-focus and don't see that we are living surrounded by God's bright grace, flooding down upon us. And if we don't acknowledge this truth, we miss out on the relationship that God wants with us. We are absorbed with self-focus, self-interest, and our arrogance in thinking that we provide what we need, that we must "make it" or "do it" ourselves! We forget that every blessing, every ray of light, and every wise word we receive comes from some source other than ourselves.

Ely wasn't the only time I needed such a reminder. I still do. And in this rich spring, when Henry and I walk up and down our street, breathe its fragrances, hear its sounds, and wave to those we meet, I am reminded: the grace of God streams into the world around us. And when we are attentive, we can see its bright presence flooding upon us.

*R*

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### **For further reflection:**

Do you regularly set aside time to slow down and become more aware of God's grace around you?

Have there been moments in your life when you experienced grace as clearly as the great light in Ely Cathedral?

If you took a walk through your neighborhood, what might you see that would awaken you to the presence of God?



# Channels of Grace

*During the season of Epiphany 2016, the Rev. Drs. John Lewis and Jane Patterson prepared a five-week online study for the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas titled “God Claims us All.” Each of the weeks focused on an aspect of how God calls us into Christian ministry, particularly lay ministry. Week Four of the study addressed the role that grace plays as we respond to God’s call on our lives and hearts and relates directly to this issue of Reflections. Below are some excerpts from “God Claims Us All.” This study can be found in its entirety, along with several other seasonal and Bible studies, at: [www.christianformation-dwtx.org](http://www.christianformation-dwtx.org).*

by the Rev. Dr. John Lewis

**T**he Collect for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany reads:

*Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you*

*and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.  
Amen* (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 215).

This collect highlights two critical dimensions of God's claim on our lives. First, it is God's grace that empowers us to hear and respond to the many ways we are called into service in the name of Jesus Christ. We identify Jesus Christ as the source of God's grace in our lives and understand that God's grace prepares and empowers us to proclaim the gospel of Christ in our own unique contexts. Second, we proclaim the gospel of Christ by becoming channels for God's grace to enrich the lives of other people around us. These experiences of divine grace reveal the glory of Christ's marvelous works in the world.

Our experiences of grace in daily life are as numerous and diverse as the variety of people and the unique contexts that shape life in our world. Although grace is a gift from God, our experiences of grace are not completely random. As followers of Jesus Christ we have a responsibility for what we do with the grace we have been given in our own lives. In the words of the author of the early Christian letter known as First Peter, we are called to be good stewards of this grace from God.

In the ancient world a steward was someone who was given the responsibility to oversee and manage all the resources of the master's household. In this position of trust the steward was given freedom to make decisions with regard to the disposition and use of the master's resources. But the steward was also accountable to the master for making sure that the resources were used for the benefit of the master's household.

The author of First Peter utilizes this concept of stewardship to characterize our relationship to God's grace. Through the different experiences of grace in our own lives, we discover many facets of this life-giving power given to each of us by God. Our experiences of grace give rise to a responsibility to use this divine resource faithfully, for the benefit of God's people and the wider world. We faithfully carry out this stewardship responsibility

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## ● *Channels of Grace* from page 13

by serving one another and becoming conduits for God's grace to enrich the lives of those we serve.

One of Paul's frequently cited statements about grace comes in his letter to the Romans (12:3-8) in which he says:

*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the mem-*

*bers have the same practice, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have events of grace that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the one having mercy, in cheerfulness.*

**Grace is experienced not only by the people whose lives are enriched as recipients of God's grace, but also by the actors who offer themselves as living sacrifices in very specific ways.**

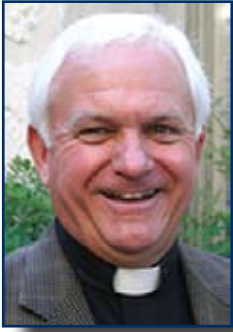
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In the first verse of this passage, Paul talks about one of the specific incarnations of grace given to him by God that has proven to be a channel of grace for others. Paul is gifted with practical wisdom about how to embody faithfully the patterns of Jesus Christ in people's lives. So it is important, he says, that we not think too highly of our own capabilities and effectiveness. We are to evaluate the fruitfulness of our own actions with sober judgment, making sure to identify the ways God is gracing others through what we do.

Paul also emphasizes the necessity for the diversity of practices in the body of Christ. If we are reflecting on our ministries with sober judgment, we realize how much we need one another. Valuing our various individual contributions ensures that we are a healthy Christian community.

In the final sentence of the passage, pay close attention to the fact that God's life-giving grace is experienced among people "in" the doing of very particular actions. For instance, in the relationship between teacher and student(s), God's grace is experienced "in" the teaching. So, too, for the person engaging in ministry, the grace is experienced "in" the ministering; grace is experienced "in" the act of encouragement offered by one person in support of the other. In every case Paul describes, the event of grace takes place in the relationship between the actor and the people benefitting from the action. Grace is experienced not only by the people whose lives are enriched as recipients of God's grace, but also by the actors who offer themselves as living sacrifices in very specific ways.

Simply put, grace is the life-giving power of God that enriches the quality of our lives and relationships in the world. Grace is a gift from God, since the power to create new life rests in God alone. Nevertheless, God calls us to be good stewards of the grace given to us by offering ourselves in Christ-like service to the world. Through our faithful acts of self-giving for others, we hope to become the means by which other people experience this life-giving power of God and come to know God and our Lord Jesus Christ in deeper and more meaningful ways. *R*



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### **For further reflection:**

What are some of your actions or ministries that have proven to be regular channels of grace for others?

Where have you experienced grace through someone else's actions or ministries? For instance, who is a person that regularly proves to be a source of encouragement in your life?

Is there a ministry that God might be calling you to in which you could become a channel of grace for others?

# In the Midst of Suffering

by the Rev. Mary Earle

Some years ago, I was invited to speak at the annual conference of the Episcopal Women of the Diocese of Alabama. We were gathering at Mentone, a center in the foothills of the Appalachians that extend into northern Alabama. That first night, the women officers of their diocesan ECW invited me to dinner at a house on the mountain. It was a happy gathering, and I visited with these new friends in the kitchen as the meal was prepared.

Afterward, as we were cleaning up, I struck up a conversation with an older woman. She mentioned in passing that her daughter-in-law and her grandson had come to live with her. While she was clearly glad for their company, I could sense that there was some sadness as she spoke. It turned out that in the prior six months, this woman's husband had died of a heart attack, and then her son was killed in a car wreck. "I am so sorry," I said, fumbling for words. "That's a lot of loss in such a short time." She looked at me kindly and said, "Well, it is. And you know, the fact is that everybody has something. That's just how life is. I have friends, and I have my community. These women have seen me through a lot. We know grace shows up at the worst of times."

She did not know that at that moment, my 31-year-old son Bryan was in treatment for brain cancer. She did not know that he had had a second recurrence, and that we were now looking toward his eventual death. She did not know that we were living with the acute suffering of watching that beautiful man begin to die. Nor did she know that I was just months away from having to take a disability retirement due to chronic illness. So her conversation came more as godly counsel than as advice. She was telling me her lived experience. Tragedy, suffering and heart-break had come her way. And yet, she did not feel comfortless. Yes, she felt sad. Yes, at times she felt overwhelmed. Yes, she felt the huge absence of the earthly presence of her son and her husband.

And yet.

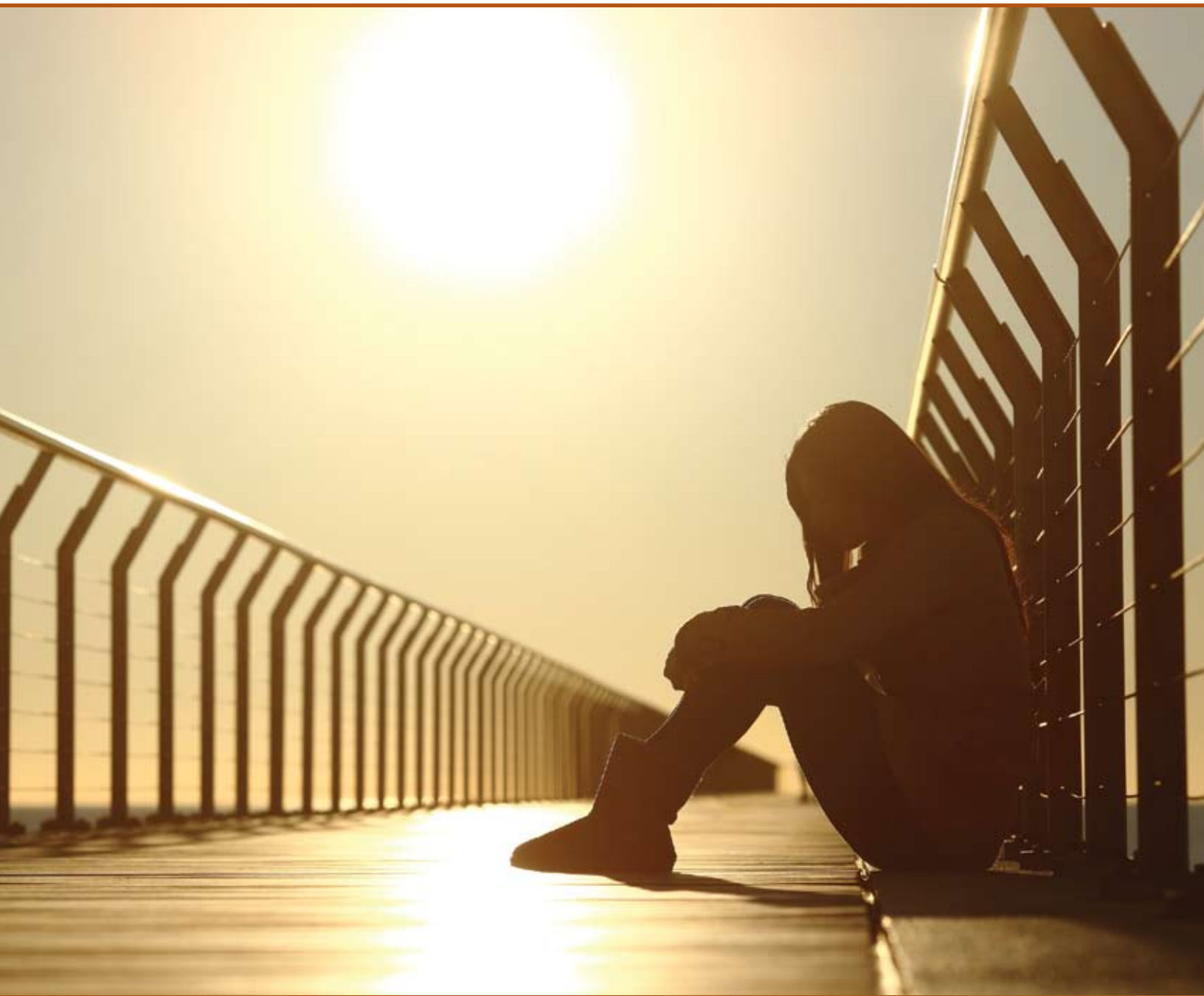
And yet. She also perceived grace in the midst of all of that pain. Grace was tightly woven with the grief and the loss.

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*If we allow it, we most often find God's grace  
in the trials of this life.*



## ● *In the Midst of Suffering*

*from page 16*

In an odd and singularly remarkable way, this conversation felt to me like the Visitation — that lovely passage in the Gospel of Luke in which the older, aged Elizabeth, heavily pregnant with the baby who will become John the Baptist, is greeted by the newly-pregnant Mary, the mother of Jesus. (Luke 1:39-56) In that encounter, those women exchange something far deeper than words. They share the fact of new life, coming into being, through the mercy and grace of God. They share the fact of participating bodily in a path of life. They are filled with joy, and also with trepidation.

That moment of discovering the new life moving within them is also a moment of uncertainty, of vulnerability, of recognizing that life is perilous. After all, in that day and age, many were the pregnant women who died of complications in childbirth. To be pregnant was also to be ready to give your life for the baby. Life and loss are intertwined from the get-go. Suffering is implicit in the mystery of gestation.

Later, some 30 years later, long after baby John and baby Jesus have been weaned and toilet trained and can walk on their own, both mothers will experience the acute suffering of a parent knowing the death of a child. Both will know that ache in the marrow, that taut iron band of grief. Both will come to live with death of their offspring. In each case, these sons will not only die; John and Jesus will suffer violent death. In John's case, the beheading ordered by King Herod at the whim of his wife. In Jesus' case, the horror of being scourged, reviled and crucified. We know Mary witnessed this death of her son. And perhaps Elizabeth lived long enough to have to bear the news of her son's beheading.

The gospel narratives give us the strong medicine of reminding us that we followers of Jesus are never exempt from suffering. Embodying the life of the Risen Lord draws us more deeply into real life — with all of its beauty and tragedy, its glory and violence. We learn that love is willing to go toward another's pain and despair. We learn that this life

## A Dog Named Grace

by Diane Thrush

In the winter of 2005 our grandson died. In the days immediately afterward, each day we followed the same routine — we got up, got dressed and went to our son and daughter in law's house for the day returning long after dark.

On the third day we returned home to find a beautiful white and tan Border Collie in our driveway. She smiled at us, a big toothy, wide smile, and wagged her tail. Literally, it was very dark for us, and there she was in the dark.

The last thing we needed was to care for a stray at that point, so we didn't feed her or take care of

her and tried to shoo her away. She had no collar or tags so we could not even begin to locate her owner. We expected her to move on to find shelter and food. But, she didn't go away.

Each night there she was when we came home, smiling and wagging her tail. After several nights, we decided to at least give her water. Finally, one night as we drove in, we both realized how comforting it was to see that smiling face and be welcomed by such an inviting presence. I said to my husband, "We are keeping her, and we are naming her Grace."

She was like God's grace, just there, available

of baptismal dying and rising is carried out with fellow pilgrims, and that we bear each others sorrows and distress.

It is a peculiar and problematic habit of the church in the United States that many who call themselves Christians believe that belonging to this faith results in a life with no problems. No pain. No divorce. No bankruptcy. No wars. No bombs going off in airports. No limbs being amputated. No horrible car wrecks. No doctor sitting before you, trying to find the right words to say, "We cannot do anything else for you." This version of Christianity is, quite frankly, a lie.

My friend from Alabama knew the truth: "Everybody's got something."

She knew that this human life, with its ragged edges and frayed seams, its rent garments, is nevertheless shot through with glory and grace. She knew that grace glimmers through, even in the darkest times. As she said to me on that mountaintop, "Isn't that part of what the cross tells us?"

*She knew that this human life, with its ragged edges and frayed seams, its rent garments, is nevertheless shot through with glory and grace.*



That God is always with us in our pain and suffering? That the Lord dwells right there in all that muck and mess?"

Over the years of my priestly life, I have offered spiritual direction. One of the difficult distortions of the culture's version of Christianity is this assumption that with baptism comes a "pass" on pain and suffering. Admittedly there are some religious leaders, particularly on television and other media, who encourage belief in a gospel that results in personal advancement, personal gain, personal wealth, personal health. The odd thing

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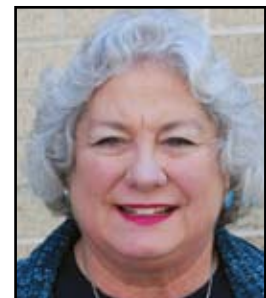
and unearned, uninvited, coming into our lives at a time when grace was needed most. I had no doubt God had sent her to us to remind us of his grace even in the darkness.

We are dog people and tried to take her into our home. She had no interest in coming in. She made her bed in a clump of Gulf Muhley grass. Its growth is stunted still and reminds me of her when I look at its misshapen form. In the daytime she stayed with our neighbor and helped him build his house. He was alone and loved her company. But as soon as it was dark, she waited for us in the driveway. She eventually came in the house for brief periods to go out in the back yard and play

with our other dog. But as soon as the games were over, she wanted out again.

Grace saw us through a lot of pain and was always there with her smile. After five years she eventually died of cancer. The gift of Grace, a dog named Grace, and the gift of the grace of God remains to this day. I will be forever grateful for both. *R*

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## ● *In the Midst of Suffering* from page 19

about this distortion is that it fails to take something pretty basic into account: we are mortal. We are born and we die. We live numbered days, and we do not know how many days that may be. This distortion shies away from Good Friday. It rushes through the gospel narratives, heading straight for resurrection.

Suffering and loss, violence and war, devastating flood and bombs in marketplaces are deadening. And strangely, those are the passages in which our illusions of self-sufficiency break down. We are led to see grace in the community of the Body of Christ, in which prayer is offered with such generosity. We are led to see the Risen Lord in the face of the stranger who offers to help. We are prompted to discover anew that all of our puny little categories for divine mercy and compassion are simply inadequate to contain the infinite goodness made known to us in Jesus.

Recently, my brother Bill was killed in a car accident in Austin, an accident caused by a drunk driver. In late February, not three months later, my other brother Tom contracted a dangerous staph infection and had to endure the amputation of his lower right leg and a subsequent heart attack. That was followed by the placement of five stents in his heart. Our family is still reeling.

And yet.

And yet, we have been held steady in the prayers of so many. Not only Episcopalians — Christians of all stripes, Jews, Muslims, friends across the interfaith spectrum. In both instances, people who did not know either Bill or Tom stepped forth in great kindness and professional care. Grace poured forth, anointing wounds of grief, of suffering, of physical disfigurement.

Is this hard? Yes. Are there easy answers? No. Are we traveling in a company, remembering that life is a gift, and each day has its own cherished blessings? Yes.

Everybody's got something. That is the truth.

The invitation is to be with one another, helping to carry the suffering and to be on the watch for grace — in the ICU, in the flooded town, at the site of the explosion. For even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. *R*

The Rev. Mary Earle is a retired priest, author, and retreat leader. Her latest book is *Marvelously Made: Gratefulness and the Body*, available from Church Publishing, and from Amazon. Reach Mary at [mcearle48@gmail.com](mailto:mcearle48@gmail.com)



### For further reflection:

Spend some time thinking about the trials that have come to you and try to identify that grace that was present in each one, either at the time or later.

"Everybody's got something." What "somethings" have come into your life?

Read again Luke 1:39-56, the story of Mary visiting Elizabeth. Read again the Magnificat (46-55) that Mary proclaims at that meeting. Identify each grace that Mary speaks of.

# Releasing Grace

by Mary Carolyn Watson

The night before Easter was a busy one for my family this year. Our next door neighbors hosted a party which included an egg hunt for all the children. My two little girls took part, eagerly bounding across the lawn with their baskets in tow looking for brightly colored eggs. They both gathered quite a few before their favorite part of the evening began – the opening of all the eggs.

My husband and I watched from several feet away as our children split open the plastic eggs, dumping the contents out onto the grass. We had noticed that some of the eggs jingled a bit while being collected. I had never seen Easter eggs filled with anything but candy, the occasional sticker, or raisins and banana chips during my own childhood (my parents were health food nuts). Did these jingling eggs contain actual money? I'm embarrassed to admit that the prospect of getting money, even just coins, from our neighbor's egg hunt was kind of thrilling to us.

The jingling eggs did, in fact, contain coins (four quarters a piece) and what's more a number of the eggs collected by our girls contained one dollar and five dollar bills! Somehow my children managed



to pick up most of the “money eggs” which was a huge disappointment to them because money isn't sweet and delicious like candy. They cast their pile of bills and coins aside, like unwanted vegetables, and ran off with fistfuls of jelly beans and chocolate eggs, intent on eating as many as possible before parental restrictions were enforced.

My husband and I actually let them go because we were so stunned and excited about the

continued on page 22)

## ● *Releasing Grace* *from page 21*

neglected pile of money. We counted it and it totaled \$23! Immediately my mind started considering the possibilities of what we could buy with this unexpected bonus. It wasn't the amount that delighted us, it was the fact that it had come to us completely unanticipated and unearned. We try to be careful with how we spend our earned money, but this free gift seemed like an opportunity to be

frivolous – to spend money on something fun and carefree.

I think it is a natural human response to want to grasp tightly to any gift that we are given. That was certainly my initial inclination with our Easter egg windfall. I quickly picked up all the coins and bills from the yard and stuffed them in my pockets before anyone noticed. But as I walked home that night, my pants jingling slightly with every step, I started to feel a slight nagging in the pit of my stomach. Was a couple of cups of Star-

## Saying Grace

by Sylvia Maddox

*God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for our food.  
By His hand we are fed. Thank you God for our daily bread.*

Many of us carry memories of sitting around the kitchen table as children, holding hands with family, and saying this prayer together. "Saying grace" at meals was the one moment we were aware that our families were knit together in faith.

Grace and gratitude have been described as two hands holding each other. It is natural to see that when we experience those moments of God's grace, the most authentic response is gratitude. When we gather around the table before a meal even in times of tension and conflict, the communal offering of "saying grace" places us in the moment of awareness that everything good comes from God. Teaching our children to say grace is a way of celebrating the good we see before us and around us. It is a way of reminding ourselves and our children to stop for a moment, to be in humble recognition and trust that God's goodness is forever.

In "saying grace" together before a meal, our children learn what is meaningful to us as they watch us pray in reverence. Even in a stressed work or home environment, they see us returning every day to the center of gratitude. "Saying grace" together can also be a way that our children teach us about gratitude. A preoccupied parent can be uplifted by joy in hearing his daughter sing out loudly "Thank you Jesus for our many blessings! Amen! Amen!"

We are called not to worry about doing it right or having the right words, but to join in an experience of awareness, joy, and gratitude for the gifts before us. When we "say grace" together, we are drawn closer to our family and all families throughout the ages.



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bucks or a new toy for my children the best way to spend this unexpected gift? Did we really need those things, and couldn't we just buy them with our earned money if we did?

I was wrestling with these thoughts when my phone rang with a call from our realtor. We were selling our house for an impending move, and the option period for some potential buyers was about to end the next day. We needed the buyers to sign off on the deal. It had been almost a week after the inspection, and we hadn't heard anything. I'd been fretting for days, hoping desperately that the contract wouldn't fall through. The prospect of having to put our house back on the market depressed me. Keeping a house "show ready" while living with two small children is no easy task.

We talked with our realtor several times over the next hour to settle some last minute negotiations. In between phone calls I frosted a coconut cake for Easter brunch, and my husband bathed our two chocolate-smearing children and put them to bed. Finally the call came; the buyers had accepted our offer. Our house was sold, really and truly. I felt an overwhelming wave of gratitude and relief wash over me. This was God's grace, and a much more consequential moment than the money eggs had been.

It is easier to be thankful in the "big" grace moments than in the small ones, I think, but such big moments can also remind us to be thankful in all grace-filled moments. That larger moment of grace helped give me some perspective about what we should do with the money from the egg hunt.

The next morning at church on Easter Sunday, my husband (who happened to be ushering) gave me a knowing wink when I placed a pile of bills and coins into the offering plate. Symbolically we were giving the gift we had received back to God. It was a small offering, to be sure, but it still felt good to be passing it on to help enrich a faith community that has meant so much to us during our time here in San Antonio.

I've heard God's grace described as rain falling from the sky, and I like the image of grace as water flowing freely. I think God's grace flows into our life, washing us with its blessing, before mov-

ing on to cleanse the hearts or quench the thirst of others. Grace becomes a part of our life, but it does not belong to us. Like water running over outstretched hands, we cannot hold onto grace permanently.

We can only let it pool momentarily in our cupped palms before spreading our fingers and allowing it to slip gently between them. Because God gives so freely to us we are called to give freely to others in return. *R*

Mary Carolyn Watson is a writer and stay-at-home mother. She lives in San Antonio with her husband and two daughters, where they attend St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Reach her at [marycarolynwatson@gmail.com](mailto:marycarolynwatson@gmail.com)



### For further reflection:

When a windfall of whatever kind — money, time, gifts — comes your way, what are you inclined to do with it?

The next time you find yourself with something extra, how can you be a vessel of God's grace?

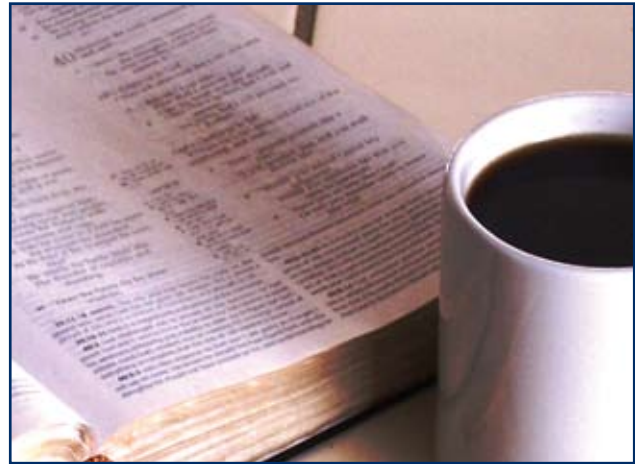
Can you remember a time when you found grace through the actions of someone else?

# Resources for small-group study

...▶ Begin your group session with one or two readings from Scripture; use a concordance to find scripture on "grace," or search an online site such as [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com) or [bible.oremus.org](http://bible.oremus.org). Or use an appropriate selection from *The Book of Common Prayer* based on the time of day from *Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families*, pg 136 BCP. Use other scriptures or psalms as you desire.

Choose one article from this issue and be sure all participants have copies. Allow participants 30 minutes to read it on their own. If your group meets in the daytime and the weather permits, send participants outside to do the reading.

Gather the group together and invite response to the questions at the end of the article. Or invite the group to add their own questions. The point here is not to answer the questions or to come to consensus, but to explore the topic of grace as it relates to your community or to individuals.



...▶ In I Corinthians 3:10-11 the apostle Paul talks about how a faithful community can change over time, while not losing its core identity. He compares his labor in founding the church in Corinth to the work of a master builder. Other ministers had come along behind him, perhaps teaching the people some new or different practices, sometimes enhancing his work and other times altering it. Each minister's task is simply to be a channel of the particular grace given to her or to him.

With equanimity, Paul goes on to say that time will tell which of the practices will have staying power. In saying so, Paul gives us some clues as well, for determining how God's grace might guide a faith community. Some questions the community might ask itself are:

- Is it clear that our foundation is in Christ?
- Do our practices of faith have the quality of building up the people around us?
- As we look back over time, can we see that our growth in Christ has staying power?



# More spiritual formation resources

Reflections magazine is one offering from the Adult Christian formation program of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas. More spiritual formation resources are available from our online site [www.christianformation-dwtx.org](http://www.christianformation-dwtx.org).

On the site you will find Bible studies, topical studies, and seasonal studies that are suitable for small groups, individuals, and Sunday morning congregational studies.

## Seasonal/Topical studies that can be used at any time

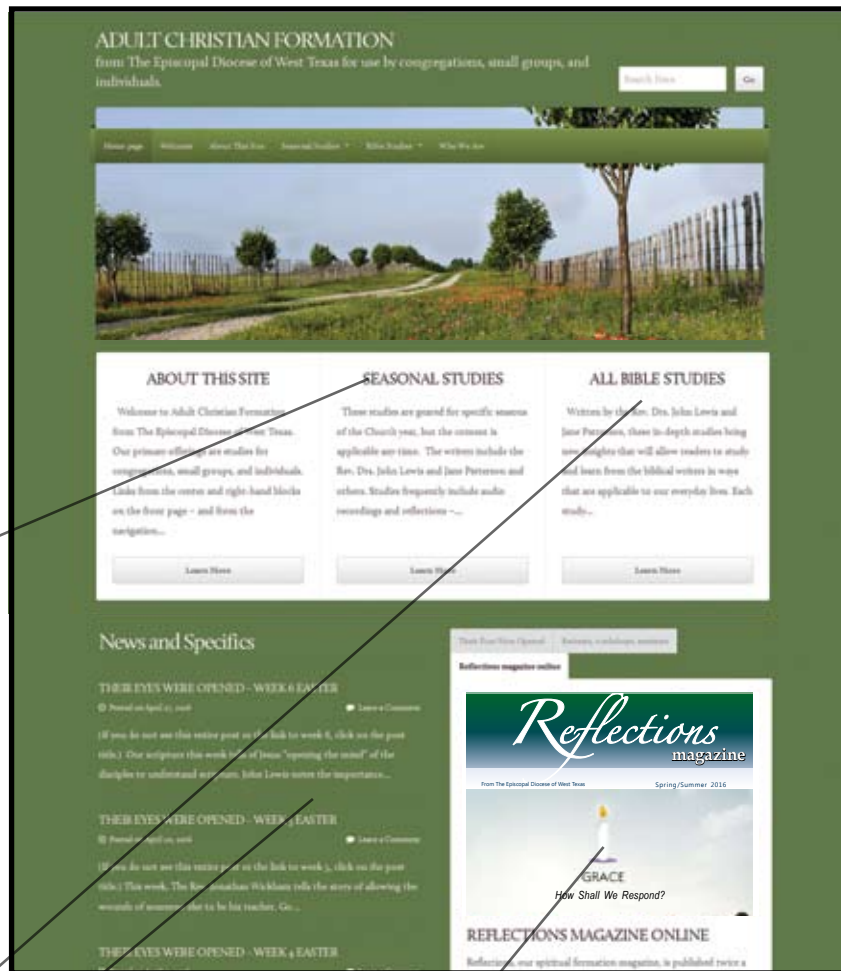
- **Their Eyes Were Opened** (Easter Season 2016)
- **God Claims Us all** (Epiphany 2016)
- **Following Jesus, Invitation to Discipleship** (Lent 2014)
- **Mary, Mother of God** (Advent 2015)
- **Practicing Lent** (Lent 2015)
- **Watch and Pray** (Advent 2014)

## Bible Studies

- Mark
- Colossians
- Philippians
- 1 and 2 Corinthians
- Ephesians
- Galatians and Thessalonians
- Romans

## and coming soon

- Luke



New studies are posted and emailed to our subscription list.

Links to  
• **Reflections magazine**  
• **Cathedral Park Meditation Walk**

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Questions?  
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# More Reflections

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Past issues and topics are also available online at [www.reflections-dwtx.org](http://www.reflections-dwtx.org)

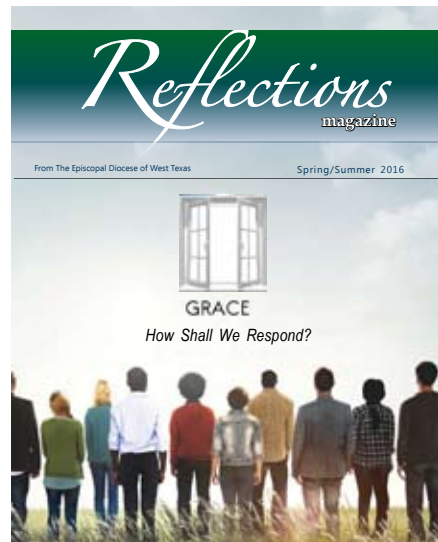
- **Communion of Saints** - Fall/Winter 2010
- **Sacred Spaces** - Spring/Summer 2011
- **Breaking Away** - Fall/Winter 2011
- **Teach us to Pray** - Spring/Summer 2012
- **The Kingdom of God** - Fall/Winter 2012
- **The Holy Spirit** - Spring/Summer 2013
- **What We Can Still Learn from the Saints** - Fall/Winter 2013
- **Spiritual Practices – Living the Gift** - Spring/Summer 2014
- **A Serious Call to Christian Vocation** - Fall/Winter 2014
- **Abundant Life** - Spring/Summer 2015
- **The Practice of Everyday Contemplation** - Fall/Winter 2015

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## Forgiven and Empowered

by the Rt. Rev. Gary Lillibridge

This issue of *Reflections*, as you know since you are on the back page, is about responding to grace. The Catechism in our Prayer Book (page 858) defines grace as “God’s favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills.”

Presumably, all of this forgiving, enlightening, stirring, and strengthening is to help us be more fully formed as disciples of Christ, so that we can, in the words of James, “be doers of the word, and not hearers only.” (1.22)

Many of our Sunday Collects in the Prayer Book have us praying for grace. For example, in Proper 21, we pray for “the fullness of (God’s) grace”; and in Proper 23, we pray that God’s “grace may always precede and follow us” (both can be found on page 234).

These Collects then continue their petitions by stating that there is a purpose for asking for a full measure of God’s grace: namely that we “may become partakers of (God’s) heavenly treasure” (Proper 21), and that we “may continually be given to good works” (Proper 23). This got me to thinking about what a life full of God’s grace might look like.

If I am a follower of Jesus who is God’s ultimate vessel of grace, I should do everything possible to pattern my life after Jesus’ example. His life, ministry, death, and resurrection are the very definition of the word grace, and so if I am praying for “the fullness of God’s grace” and I want this grace to “precede and follow me,” I need to think about the things that are important to Christ, care about the things that God cares about, and do the things that the Holy Spirit did and continues to do. I can’t be praying for the fullness of God’s grace unless I am inclined to act with favor towards others, whether they have earned

it or whether they deserve it. My grace is supposed to be God’s grace, put into action in my thoughts, words, and deeds.

St. Paul writes that we are to be “imitators of God” (Ephesians 5.1). We will be imitators, even if imperfectly, when we strive for a full measure of God’s grace by acting like Christ. This reminds me of an event in John’s Gospel, when one day some Greeks appear before the disciple Philip and make a simple request, “We would like to see Jesus” (12.21). People are still longing to see Jesus, and it is our privilege and our responsibility to do all in our power to be imitators of God, full of grace, so that they may see Jesus.

*from The Book of Common Prayer (pg 858):*

Think and care about what God thinks and cares about, and you will see people differently. As a result, you won’t be able to do anything other than “be given to good works”

**Q. What is grace?**

**A. Grace is God’s favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace, God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills.**

because you’ll understand that the heavenly treasure means loving God with all your heart, mind, and soul; and loving your neighbors as yourself; right here and right now. *R*



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