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1st Sunday of Advent (C)

Some people say it is difficult to believe in God in the world today, adding that it is especially hard to believe in a God of love when you see the hatred and violence that fills the world God has created. But it seems to me that it isn't that easy to get rid of God, either. A casual look into the depth of the sky on a clear night can fill us with a profound sense of awe. We find ourselves thinking that someone or some power greater than ourselves must be behind all of this. And we keep running into God-like things-- love and loyalty among family members and friends... nobility of character... a willingness to sacrifice oneself in the interest of others. We see such things and we know there must be something greater that we cannot see. And sometimes in quiet moments there is the sense that someone is there, a mysterious "presence". We might call those times and experiences "Glimmers of Grace".

A short story: It had been a horrible day at the office, one crisis after another. Dave spent the day saving deals that were coming apart, reassuring angry customers whose orders had been messed up, going to the mat with vendors — putting out one fire after another. Just as he was about to leave for the day, he remembered: it was his family's night to volunteer at the soup kitchen. He called his wife, apologized for forgetting, and said he would meet her and the kids at the church hall in a half hour. Once there, he slowly managed to put the stress of the day behind him and got into the rhythm of the busy kitchen. His job that night was making the soup, with his daughter helping cut the vegetables. At 6:00 PM, the doors opened. He took his station at the steaming caldron of chicken noodle soup. The first guest was an elderly woman in a torn coat and ripped sneakers. He ladled the soup into a bowl, and gently handed it to her. "Thank you so much," she said. "Thank you and bless you." Her smile was the brightest thing he had seen all day. And he realized that he was, indeed, blessed. Dave experienced a "Glimmer of Grace."

For 1,500 years the Western Church has been celebrating the season of Advent, and this year our faith community will be focusing on the "Glimmers of Grace" that are constantly coming our way from God. Children's Advent calendars have been around for some time and they take different forms. But in all of them a child opens a window each day throughout December in

preparation for Christmas. The final window is always the baby lying in the manger—the Jesus who is the true, authentic window for Christians into the ultimate mystery we call God. Jesus, you might say, is the “Glimmer of Grace” *par excellence*.

Jesus revealed many things about God to us, the most important being the unbelievable love and forgiveness and mercy that God has for each one of us. He also revealed God’s desire for each one of us to offer our lives in the service of building up the Kingdom of God. Jesus made it clear that God has a plan of life for each one of us—God even know the hairs on our heads (or lack thereof). And the whole idea behind prayer and worship and reflection and the search for wisdom is to discover the plan that God has for me, which is different for the plan God has for you. The more I am able to discover the path God wants me to follow, the closer I actually am to God... the greater holiness I achieve... and the happier I become. The ultimate goal, of course, is holiness-- full union with the divine-- which can happen during the course of this life (we call such people “saints”), but many do not achieve this full union until the next life. Like a child’s Advent calendar, it takes most of us a lifetime of opening one window after another, one life experience after another, to slowly come to see the hand of God at work in our lives. In other words, it takes a lot of “Glimmers of Grace.”

The people of Israel went through this same process of becoming more and more aware of God’s presence and action in their lives and in their history. In the first reading from the Prophet Jeremiah, we heard: *“The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah. In those days, in that time, I will raise up for David a just shoot; he shall do what is right and just in the land. In those days, Judah shall be safe and Jerusalem shall dwell secure...”* This vision of a new leader was a “Glimmer of Grace” that offered hope to the people of Israel and encouraged them as they continued their journey to discover God’s will for them.

The more we are aware of God’s presence in our lives, and the more we are in sync with the path God wishes us to walk, the more we know what God wants us to do. Watch this for a moment:

(show video: *ShoulderTaps*)

I call it “Glimmers of Grace”... you call it “Shoulder Taps.” What we are talking about is the presence of God in our lives, and our ability to cooperate with that presence. The world, as well as our lives, can be full of darkness and confusion. But “Glimmers of Grace” can bring light into that darkness-- and responding to “Shoulder Taps” can bring hope to those who have lost it. As L.R. Knost said: *“Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break. And all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention. So-- go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.”*