

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Blessed Presence

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Grace and peace to you from the One who is already here, already reaching toward us, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, we explore how God's grace frees us from earning presence and invites us to receive it as a gift. Our bulletin states clearly: community is "beautiful and messy and fulfilling and conflicted and...the POINT." This is among the most honest statements we can make in church, as it articulates a profound truth.

Community is not merely an abstract concept; it is composed of people. People are complex: they may be glorious and weary, generous and guarded, joyful and anxious, faithful and fearful, sometimes all within the same hour. Yet God calls us together into community, nonetheless.

And right next to that honesty, our bulletin offers a welcome that is just as bold: "You are welcome here!" Not as "perfect, put-together people." Not as people who have it all figured out. Not as people who have repaired every relationship and cleaned up every habit and conquered every doubt. You are welcome here as you are.

But it is hard to live like we believe that. Many of us subconsciously believe we must audition for belonging, quietly picking up the idea that God's presence is something you earn. We learn it in school. We learn it at work. We learn it in families. We learn it in social circles. And if we are not careful, we learn it in church too.

We start to imagine that God's presence is like a prize at the end of a moral obstacle course. That God is near when we are doing well, and distant when we are struggling. That God is pleased when we are polished, and disappointed when we are messy.

Lent can easily be influenced by this mindset, becoming a season focused on proving ourselves and demonstrating our seriousness to God. But what if we could imagine Lent as liberation rather than performance? Instead of a marathon

where we compete for medals, Lent becomes a kind of gym for grace, a place to practice receiving, not earning. Practices such as fasting or adopting new disciplines are not ways to secure grace, but opportunities to strengthen our trust in God's free gift of grace and to embrace the freedom that it offers.

Today's scriptures, and our liturgy, present a different message to the one we often live out: **Blessed Presence is not earned but received.** It is not a wage or payment for religious effort; it is a free gift, discovered when we approach God with honesty and recognize that God is already reaching toward us. The good news is that God's presence does not await our improvement but meets us amid our real lives. Blessed Presence is like finding quiet comfort at a hospital bedside, where words run out but love stays present. It is like the laughter and care shared around a kitchen table, even when the day was hard. It is the gentle reassurance of a friend on a bench at the playground, showing up when you feel alone. Grace takes root not in perfect places, but exactly where life is most vulnerable and real.

Genesis gives us Abram and Sarai at the beginning of a journey that will shape the story of faith for generations. God says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." This is no small request. It is not just changing a zip code. It is leaving what is familiar, leaving what is secure, leaving what is known, and going into a future that is not mapped out.

And notice what God does not do. God does not say, "First, become perfect." God does not say, "First, prove you are worthy." God does not say, "First, show me that you can handle it." God simply calls. And God promises. "I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Thus, the blessing is not solely for Abram and Sarai; it is intended to move through them. Blessed presence is not private comfort but a gift that reshapes us into people who can bless others. This aligns with the welcome statement I've already referenced: God calls us together into community "for the sake of one another, our neighbors, and creation."

In other words, God's call is not simply "come," but rather "come, and then go as a blessing." The significant point for us is that Abram sets out before everything is clear, moves before every fear is resolved, and proceeds with questions and uncertainty. What sustains Abram is not certainty, but presence.

Then we meet Nicodemus. John tells us he comes “by night.” He is a leader, a teacher, a Pharisee. He has a reputation to maintain. He has a place in the community. And he comes at night because he is curious, and because he is afraid.

Nicodemus is one of the most relatable people in the gospel. He carries what many of us carry: fear, fear that gets in the way. Fear of being seen. Fear of being judged. Fear of asking the wrong question. Fear of what it might mean if Jesus is right. When have you found yourself coming to Jesus “by night”? Perhaps it is the moment when questions feel too risky to voice, or when faith feels uncertain, or when you hesitate to let others see your need or your longing. Can you remember a time you approached God with more caution than confidence, with more questions than answers? Take a quiet moment to locate your own “night,” that space of uncertainty or hesitance where you still find yourself drawing near, even if you are unsure.

Nicodemus also comes with respect: “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God.” Nicodemus is reaching. Nicodemus is searching. Nicodemus is showing up, still guarded, still unsure, but present.

And Jesus does not scold him for the timing. Jesus does not say, “Come back in daylight when your faith is stronger.” Jesus meets him in the night. And tells Nicodemus, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus tries to make this manageable: “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” He wants a method. A system. A controllable path.

But Jesus does not give Nicodemus a technique. Jesus gives Nicodemus a new birth. “Born of water and Spirit.” And then Jesus uses wind as the image: it moves where it chooses. You can hear it, you can feel it, you can see what it does; but you cannot control it.

This is deeply unsettling for many, as we often prefer a religion that can be mastered. We appreciate plans, rules, and measurable outcomes, and we desire to know whether we are doing it “right.” Nicodemus wants a map; Jesus offers wind. This stark invitation calls us from control to trust. However, Jesus describes a life of the Spirit: a life that is a gift, not an accomplishment; a presence that is received, not achieved. Then Jesus speaks the line we know so well: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...”

God so loved the world. Not the world as it should be. Not the world once it cleans itself up. Not the world once it becomes presentable. No, God so loved the world as it is (messy, conflicted, beautiful, broken) that God gives the Son.

And John makes the purpose plain: God did not send the Son to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved. This is the heart of Blessed Presence: Jesus does not show up as a condemning presence. Jesus shows up as saving presence, blessed and blessing presence.

Paul then helps us name why this matters so much. Paul says, do not misunderstand Abraham. If Abraham's righteousness were a wage, mere payment for work, then grace would no longer be grace. It would be a transaction. It would be "I do my part, God does God's part." And that is not the gospel.

Paul says instead: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." It was not earned. It was entrusted. And then Paul describes the God Abraham trusted: the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." That line is not poetry. It is a promise for people who think their story is stuck. It is a promise for the person who believes change is impossible. It is a promise for the person who thinks hope is naïve. It is a promise for the person who feels like they have tried everything and nothing has worked. It is a promise for the community that is tired, or conflicted, or unsure of what comes next.

Because the God we trust is not limited to what is already real. God can call into existence what does not yet exist. And friends, our liturgy has been preaching that same gospel today. We confessed the places we go looking for life that cannot give it to us: "worldly delights that deceive." We confessed our self-reliance. We confessed how fear makes us smaller than love. We even confessed that we sometimes dwell in "tombs of self-pity and discontent."

And what did God do? Not condemnation. Not disgust. Not distance. Instead, we heard absolution. We heard that God's steadfast love, grace, and forgiveness abound. (PAUSE) Let that word settle in you for a moment. Let there be a pause, so the weight of **forgiveness** can rest in your body. That forgiveness, that knowledge of God's grace, is a part of the blessed presence of God.

We heard that through faith this is God's free gift. We heard that the Spirit dwells in us, pours God's love into our hearts, and gives us "life and peace." That is Romans 4 in the key of worship.

In a few moments, we will move to the Meal. This Meal is not an award for the spiritually successful; it is food for the hungry, mercy for the weary, and grace for those learning how to live and walk the Way. At this table, God does not ask us to present a résumé. God gives a gift: the presence of Jesus Christ in bread and wine. And then we are sent. Not because we always get it right. But because we have been met by grace. Not because we are perfect. But because we have been embraced.

As the offertory invitation puts it so beautifully today: we are set free from the burdens of proving ourselves, to God or one another. So here is the charge: go in peace, believing the good news. Go in peace, centering your life on the love and grace Jesus teaches. And then, because Blessed Presence is never just for us, go as a blessing to the world.

Choose **one** small practice to guide your next seven days. Let each be a single, prayerful verb you can repeat as you go:

1. **Bless:** Take a "Blessing Walk" in your neighborhood. As you walk, pray simple blessings over what you see: "Bless this house." "Bless the people who live here." "Bless the workers." "Bless the lonely." "Bless the children." "Bless the ones who are afraid." Ask God to make you a blessing to "all the families of the earth," starting right where your feet are.
2. **Reveal:** Have one honest conversation with a trusted person. Say one true sentence you have been holding back, for example: "I have been more anxious than I have admitted." "I have been lonely." "I need help." "I am not sure what I believe right now." Not to be dramatic. Just to be real. Because Blessed Presence is found when we show up as we are.
3. **Gift:** Offer one act of "non-earning" grace. Do one thing that is purely a gift: write a note of encouragement, bring a meal, make a call, offer a ride, tip generously, or reconcile a small tension. Not to prove you are good, but because you have been loved.

Choose one. Keep it small. Do it prayerfully. And as you do, listen for the wind of the Spirit, moving in ways you cannot control, but that you can receive. And as

you live out your call, keep your eyes and heart open for the blessed presence of God in your life. Amen.