

Imperfect Subversive Grace  
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church  
December 24, 2025  
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Tonight, we find ourselves at the manger, in this most unlikely of places - born to the most unlikely people - **this** is where we find God's saving grace. The child, the messiah - the gift of our salvation. Yet, we've heard this story so many times, that we can take it for granted.

A story. Years ago, when I was in seminary, the final exam in my Biblical Greek course was to translate an assigned portion of a Gospel text. And then to present a paper to the class, explaining in exhaustive detail how the direct translation from the Greek shaped our understanding of the passage, and informed us going forward.

I was assigned this portion of Luke's gospel, and I honestly don't remember what I wrote in my paper, so you've been spared that! What I **do** remember are the images the words evoked when I really paid attention to this story. Luke's blatant contrast between the power of the Roman Emperor, and this vulnerable family.

Caesar, the self-proclaimed "August One," and his grandiose proclamation that "all the world" would bend to his whims, and be registered, so he could squeeze more taxes out of the people he oppressed. And this inconsequential family, and thousands of others like them, who are forced to take a dangerous journey, for no reason other than further lining the pockets of a delusional king.

Because they live in constant fear of their Roman overlords, Joseph and Mary risk everything to go as dictated to Bethlehem. Where there's no room for them, and Mary gives birth and lays her child in a manger. **This** is the Messiah, and the angels proclaim him - glorifying God, and inviting the shepherds to see this thing that God is doing in their midst.

I remember thinking that the good news of God's own son started out as a minor footnote under the blazing marque of Caesar's power and ego. And yet, this seemingly insignificant family will change the world. Because God works in subversive ways - beneath the radar, through, and with, and for the most vulnerable people.

I think I said something like that when I presented my paper. But if I'm honest - mostly what I remember is the stress and anxiety of delivering this presentation to the class, with my toddler daughter in tow. She'd had her ear tubes placed the day before, and I brought her with me because I simply couldn't leave her with a sitter. She was still recovering and was fussy and wouldn't settle. She refused to stay in her bright pink jog stroller while I tried to describe the nuances of the Greek text. She was crawling around under the professor's desk, when she bumped her head and started wailing. So I picked her up and spent the rest of my presentation

jiggling her on my hip and comforting her as I tried to answer questions. Yes, this was my final in the course, and it mattered, but nothing mattered more than my baby girl. So, I did my best, but naturally my focus was on her.

Even though I tried to put the whole fiasco out of my mind, it came back around the following semester, when our professor started discussing the Greek term *charis*, which is most often translated as "grace." He was trying to explain how grace is multi-faceted. And he gave the example of hearing this Gospel story of a mother and her newborn in a completely new way, because the story was being told that day by a mother holding her daughter. Who together embodied so much love, that they visibly demonstrated the love of God for us and all of God's children. He said. "That's *charis*, that's grace - unexpected, unearned, and life changing."

Let's be clear, I was not graceful in that moment in the classroom. I was frazzled, guilt-ridden, and anxious. I was failing to be the mother I hoped to be for my daughters, while making a mess of my final presentation. And **yet** - my beloved professor somehow found grace there. Because God works through us - in all our human imperfection.

On this night we celebrate the good news of our salvation - that in Jesus, God chose to become one of us, to meet us in all our humanity. God continues to meet us in our imperfect lives. And God works in and through and for us. As this text proclaims, God acts through unlikely people, through nobodies in the grand scheme of the world.

This Gospel story calls us to do more than celebrate. It calls us to participate in the grace of God, and to embody it for others. Because that's how God works, and that's how the world changes - through the grace of our messy, imperfect lives.

Tonight, we marvel at what God is doing, and then we move out into the world - **to participate** in the subversive work of turning the world from what it is to what God dreams it will become.

It's through imperfect, under-the-radar people like us, that God's dream is made real for us, and all of God's children. By our participation in God's subversive love for world, through our defiant acts of hope and grace: caring for those we've been given to love, and for our neighbors who are suffering, and all those being crushed by the powers that be.

Let's end with a quick local story. Last week, several clergy members in Pittsfield were contacted by a case worker at Community Legal Aid. She is working with a woman and her children in desperate need of assistance. After jumping through all the hoops and hurdles, this single mom simply needed some funding to secure housing for her and her children. The case worker reached out to us after exhausting all other resources, sharing that this particular has her "fully tethered by the heartstrings." She concluded her email with the words: "We are really hoping for a miracle at this point."<sup>1</sup>

Between St. Stephen's, Zion Lutheran, United Church, First Baptist, and Cathedral of the Beloved, we were able to finalize gathering those funds today. A small, but meaningful Christmas miracle. God's grace embodied.

So, yes, let's marvel and celebrate this holy night, and then, together, may we continue to participate in the work that God is doing: to lift up the lowly, and feed the hungry, and house the homeless, and protect the vulnerable. Turning the world from what it is, to what God dreams it will become.

Together, may we embody God's grace, given to the world on this holy night; God's love made real, for us and all of God's children. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Ashley Stone, Case Manager, Community Legal Aid  
email: Inquiry re: financial assistance for struggling Pittsfield mother, Correspondence Dec 17 - Dec 24, 2025