

## **"Faith's Review and Expectation"**

**Rev. Lee F. Veazey**

The start of a new year provides a good opportunity to look back and evaluate the previous year and to look ahead and make plans for the current year. Two hundred and fifty-one years ago, on Sunday, January 1, 1773, the congregation of a rural church in Olney, England sang a hymn whose lyrics encouraged those singing to look back at the past and to look ahead to the future. The hymn had been written by their pastor, an Anglican clergyman, to accompany his New Year's Day sermon from an Old Testament text, 1 Chronicles 17:16-17, and was entitled "Faith's Review and Expectation". His hymn was then published in a hymnal in 1779, where it became better known by its first two words: "Amazing Grace!"

Despite the enduring popularity of the hymn, its central focus of grace can be and sadly often is misunderstood. Irish singer-songwriter Bono, frontman of the band U2, illustrates this when he said, *"It's a powerful idea, grace. It really is. We hear so much of karma and so little of grace. Every religion teaches about karma and what you put out you will receive. And even Christianity, which is supposed to be about grace, has turned redemption into good manners, or the right accent, or good works, or whatever. I just can't get over grace."* Singing the words of "Amazing Grace!" by John Newton, the former slave trader turned Christian minister, with your lips along with believing the words with your heart helps you to not only not "get over grace" but also to go further into grace, increasingly recognizing God's grace as both life's anchor and life's engine.

Not only is "Amazing Grace!" the most familiar and well-known hymn of all time in the English-speaking world, it's also one especially suitable to sing at the beginning of a new year, when the calendar calls us to look back and to look ahead. Newton captured this idea of looking in two directions through the eyes of faith when he writes in verse 3: *"Thro' many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; 'tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."* In looking back to the past Newton expressed his thanks to God for his grace, and in looking ahead to the future he expressed his trust in the God of grace.

And so, in these early days of 2024 are you able to look back and give thanks to God for anything? Are you able to look ahead and trust God for everything? If not, you may want to go to school, so to speak, with John Newton who, as he neared death, was reported to have said: *"When I was young, I was sure of many things; now there are only two things of which I am sure: One is, that I am a miserable sinner; and the other is, that Christ is an all-sufficient Saviour. He is well taught who learns these two lessons."*

If looking back on 2023 leads to regret and if looking ahead to 2024 leads to fear, Newton offers counsel with these words reflecting on "the already" and "the not yet" of the Christian life: *"I am not what I ought to be! Ah! How imperfect and deficient! — I am not what I wish to be! I 'abhor what is evil,' and I would 'cleave to what is good!' — I am not what I hope to be! — Soon, soon, I shall put off mortality: and with mortality all sin and imperfection! Yet though I am not what I ought to be, nor what I wish to be, nor what I hope to be, I can truly say, I am not what I once was — a slave to sin and Satan; and I can heartily join with the Apostle, and acknowledge: 'By the grace of God I am what I am!'"* With these words, Newton is picking up the writing of the Apostle Paul and applying it to his own changed and changing life. The amazing turn of events in the life of John Newton and his grateful and humble response to God's work in his life reminds all of us that, as author Jerry Bridges in his book *The Discipline of Grace* writes, *"Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace."*

Here at Grace and Peace Presbyterian Church, a church in and for Bellevue, we want to stay in Newton's "school" in order to regularly remind ourselves of who we are and who God is. In particular, we want to remind ourselves of our ongoing need for grace along with the ongoing reach of grace through the person and work Jesus Christ. Whether the days of 2024 will be some of our worst days or some of our best days, we desire to live as people anchored to and powered by the "amazing grace" of God. We gather on Sundays at 10:30am to worship God and to welcome one another. Join us!

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