

Homeward bound: John 1:10-18; Jeremiah 31:7-14

by [Christine D. Pohl](#) in the [December 27, 2005](#) issue

"It's all grace," my dear friend replied. For some reason, I was surprised at the simplicity and firmness of her answer. I'd asked how she was able to face the last stages of cancer with such peace, generosity and good humor. The complete absence of bitterness or resentment in her demeanor and words was striking. She spoke readily of gratitude for the ways God had been faithful and for the gift of family and friends. She is not given to sentimental expressions of faith, and her words were unembellished. Acknowledging how terribly hard it was to think about leaving, she added, "I've had a very good life."

Reading Jeremiah 31 against the backdrop of the beauty of her life and the sense of imminent and premature loss, I realized that I had been in the company of one who was "radiant over the goodness of the Lord." Those quaint and distant words had been embodied in her being. She was very sick and yet truly radiant, "satisfied" with God's bounty.

The exiles to whom the words of Jeremiah 31 were addressed were scattered, weary and vulnerable. The specifications of God's faithfulness, spelled out in images of bountiful food, flourishing gardens, safety, dancing and gladness, provide a picture of overwhelming, over-the-top grace. Straight paths, deep consolation and special care for the most vulnerable suggest a road home shaped by generous welcome and tender care.

When John introduces Jesus, he describes him as "full of grace and truth." When he further describes Jesus' impact, he says that "from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." The language of bountiful goodness appears again—grace piled on top of grace. Yet just as in Jeremiah, this is not grace separate from suffering or loss. John has just described how Jesus was mostly rejected by those to whom he had come. But the incarnate Word, God-in-the-flesh, was full of grace and truth. In God's economy, there is a superabundance of grace.

Jeremiah's description of the return from exile, John's portrayal of Jesus, and my friend's experience of grace make me wonder why we so often view grace as a

scarce commodity. We live as if there's not enough to go around, and ration our experience and our expressions of it. But if the grace available to us is anything, it is abundant. Its close connection to costliness and truth in the description of Jesus, however, also reminds us that this grace should not be an excuse for indulgence or presumption.

So how do we respond to the grace we have received in Christ? Can we be described as "satisfied" with God's bounty or as "radiant" over the goodness of the Lord? If ever there were a description of a countercultural demeanor, this might be it. It is so easy to be discontent; we are trained to want more, expect more and deliver more. Contentment seems incongruous with striving for excellence—a convenient and dangerous cover for laziness or passivity. But always wanting more makes it very likely that we will overlook the gifts we have received. And perpetual dissatisfaction makes gratitude a very awkward and unfamiliar practice.

Because our basic theological understandings of grace include assent to the claim that the most beautiful and precious things in and about our lives are unearned and undeserved, themes of gift and gratitude sometimes seem overworked. Nevertheless, encounters with an abundance of grace and goodness can still surprise us and remind us of how little we can do except respond with thanksgiving and gratitude.

My friend introduced me to Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* this past summer. That amazing novel provided a way into talking about her illness and the reflections on life, death, gift and loss that it was eliciting. Gratitude was the main theme of our conversations, and gratitude shaped our capacity to see things differently. There was a fresh, almost painful beauty to the New England coastline and a renewed treasuring of a summer cottage full of beloved family members. Colored sweatshirts and sailboats seemed brighter, well-worn books and grace-filled conversations more precious. The possibility of loss simultaneous with overwhelming gratitude was confusing, but it clearly changed our vision.

In Jeremiah 31:2, the people of God are described as having found "grace in the wilderness." God's sufficient provision along the way provides a taste of the fuller bounty yet in store for them and us. Wilderness and exile are never the final word; in fact, the final word in Jesus is grace upon grace. The shepherd continues to gather the flock; the host continues to offer a banquet of restoration, love and abundance.

Like that of the Reverend John Ames in *Gilead*, my friend's life has been shaped by a long faithfulness that prepared her to be open to the work of grace in one of the hardest places imaginable. As I sat on her bed a few weeks ago, and as we talked for as long as her strength held out, I saw sufficient grace, abundant grace. Strangely understated, it was surprisingly sufficient. The imminence of death has a way of making things clear—the uncertainties of life, the importance of love, the startling discontinuities and continuities between this life and eternity. Grace had surely brought us safe thus far; I have a new sense of the sufficiency of God's grace to also lead us home.