Gentlemen, please join me in the prayer to the Holy Spirit that you find on page #48 in your worship booklet.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created and you shall renew the face of the earth. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations. Through Christ our Lord.  Amen.

Lost at Christmas -

When I was seven years old I got lost at the Santa Claus parade in our community in Chattanooga, Tennessee. As the whole town gathered on the side of the road on a cool, early December evening I was left by my parents to find a suitable viewing spot at street level as they held aloft my younger brothers. I am the oldest of three boys. The middle son, my brother John, who was five years old was on my dad’s shoulders. This was a great place to view the whole proceedings. My brother, Rob, who was just about to turn three years old, was held up by our mother. This was an acceptable place to view the parade for a three year old.

I would have, if I could have, climbed a sycamore tree likely Zacchaeus. I was left to look between legs and around people and inevitably pushed to the front of the crowd to get a clear view. In one moment the heightened excitement of Santa’s arrival, came and passed as he and his sleight rolled on down the street. The event for which we had all awaited with wide eyes was over in a moment and there was no longer a reason to stand out in the cold. The children and their parents were invited through a blaring loud speaker on the sleight to visit Santa at his home at the North Pole, which was just down the block in a side parking lot.

The crowds divided as some went home to their December warmth and for others on to the North Pole. Our parents had promised us the North Pole and a visit with Santa. That must have been where they went as I later heard that I was the reason that my brothers didn’t get to visit Santa. Soon I was standing on the side of the road in this business district without my brothers and parents. They were gone, presumably to the North Pole and I was seven years old and alone.

My talk is titled: Prevenient Grace

My Name is Ben Foulk

There was a very nearby roadside motel. The kind with a neon sign that said, ‘vacancy’ on it almost all of the time and the word ‘no’ which I am sure was controlled by a little switch at the front desk. It was ready in just the event that every room was taken. The switch would be flipped and the travelling public would know that there was ‘no vacancy’ at this motel. It reminded me of a version of the story of Jesus’ birth, where I had learned that there was no room at the inn for Joseph, Mary and their soon to be born Son.

I went to the motel and identified myself as a lost child. I don’t remember any great panic or fear but I knew that my parents were on their way to the North Pole and I was standing on Ringgold Rd, Chattanooga, TN. The clerk instructed me to go out and sit on the wall of the brick planter that was the base for the neon sign. He figured wisely that my parents would soon return for me.

It wasn’t long before my parents found me and I received my due warning, but nothing sterner than that. I think that we all knew who the adults were in this situation. All was well, the lost had been found.

It reminds me of a very significant line in the very incredible song, Amazing Grace. “I once was lost but now am found.” I didn’t find my parents, my parents found me. I didn’t find God, God in a work of Amazing Grace came looking for me and found me.

“Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,

I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

***Please share this line with me: “I once was lost but now am found.”***

The line isn’t I’ve found it … but I am found.

This one line reminds us of some very significant truths from the Bible.

* The LOST cannot find their way back home on their own. Lost is Lost. Lost is a spiritual description of residing in place of being separated from the living God. I didn’t find God, it was God in Jesus Christ who found me, who came looking for me personally and all of his lost creation collectively.
* The LOST do their best to stop running away from God. One of the first lessons that we might teach a child when they are lost is to stay where they are. Stop running. The ones who love them are already forming a search party.
* When we seek God, when we long for God and ask questions of God about life. We seek God’s help and reach out to God with the truth that we know, even trusting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, this desire and the insight to the truth of salvation has been given to us by God as a gift. We didn’t achieve this understand on our own.

***Definition - What is Grace - Grace comes from Greek “charis” = gift***

Gifts that we earn are not gifts, they are payment – they are payback.

The gift of Grace that we are speaking about is a gift that we cannot afford, one that we cannot earn, one that can only be welcomed by gratitude and the trusting relationship of faith that it requires.

If we immediately think of exchanging a ‘gift’ that is given to us then the gift hasn’t met our need, if we immediately think of re-gifting the gift, to pass it on to another person (or couple) then this isn’t a gift we will treasure.

All of God’s ways of salvation are by their nature Grace – a gift that flows from God’s love.

Different ‘kinds’ or ‘flavors’ of grace work at different times in our life.

***The kind of Grace that we are going to look at this morning is Prevenient Grace.***

***Prevenient*** is an older word that has fallen out common usage in our English language but is good for us to learn and to be able to identify.

The word ***prevenient*** comes from the Latin ***praevenire***-- “to come before.”

In Christian theology it means **the grace that comes before** any human decision or endeavor. Prevenient grace is at work before we are even aware of it.

Prevenient Grace is Preparing Grace – the gift of God’s love that makes us able as individuals and as all of lost humanity, to turn toward God. God makes us able. God prepares us and a way for us. God gives us a desire to search and to walk in the way that leads to life.

God began to prepare a way to restore our broken relationship.

God picked a Noah to build and pilot a boat.

God selected Abraham to follow by faith and

receive a promise that would bring a blessing.

God established a covenant with his people Israel to bring his law and carry forward the blessing.

God came as the Word made flesh and lived among us as Jesus of Nazareth.  
 While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.  
  
 We see that God’s action became deeper and wider with each offer of relationship, until as we learn from John 3: 16, MSG 16 "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.

John Wesley – the founder of the Methodist movement understood the necessity of **Prevenient Grace** in our lives, because of the witness of scripture:  
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With Israel:

* Jeremiah 1:5 (ESV): "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you..." (The word of God to Jeremiah as his call to ministry.)
* Jeremiah 31:3 (KJV): "...I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." (The promise of a future hope of restoration to Israel.)
* Ezekiel 34:11, 16 (ESV): "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out...I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..." (Here the beautiful image of shepherd and the sheep is used to describe God’s care over his Israel and by implications of the saving work of Christ, all of lost humanity.)

Through Jesus’ Ministry:

* Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."
* John 6:44: "No man can come unto me, unless the Father who hath sent me, draw him..."
* John 12:32: "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.”

Witness of the New Testament Church:

* Romans 2:4: "...the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance..."
* Philippians 2:13: "For it is God that worketh in you according to his good pleasure, both to will and to do his good will."
* 1 John 4:19: "We love him, because he first loved us."
* Titus 2:11: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men."

***We experience Prevenient Grace in many ways*** and most of them are revealed to us as we look back with a certain insight that God allows.  
  
Events in life – positive or negative  
  
Care and sacrifice of others  
  
Body of believers – Jesus in flesh.  
  
 Holy Spirit awakening us – simple awareness of beauty, gratitude, conviction of sin  
  
Holy Spirit courting or wooing us  
  
***Prevenient Grace describes all of God's action that brings us to the very door of salvation. From far away to the very front porch of the household of faith.***

***The Invitation to Come!***

One of the last verses of the Bible Rev. 22:17 presents this beautiful invitation.

***17****"Come!" say the Spirit and the Bride.   
Whoever hears, echo, "Come!"   
Is anyone thirsty? Come!   
All who will, come and drink,   
Drink freely of the Water of Life!*

When I was a child I spent most of my summers with my mamaw and papaw in Bristol, Va. I played all day long on most of those day by myself. There were tasks to help with but mostly I was on my own to play outside: climbing trees, sorting scrap wood for a project, playing in the smoke house that had become a shed for furniture, tools, all kinds of odds and ends.

At a certain time of the day the inner condition of hunger and the audible announcement of my mamaw that “supper’s ready” aligned in such a way that it was time to stop what I was doing and come to the table. If I missed it I missed it, I might hear the invitation again. One way or the other I was going to miss something good.

Some have likened Prevenient Grace to the spiritual hunger that makes us ready for the Lord and the hearing of that invitation along with our willingness to respond that brings to the doorway of Salvation.

***Prevenient Grace is surely Preparing Grace – that makes us ready for all that God has for us.***

***Critical questions for us this weekend:***

Will you not run from God this weekend?   
*Where ever you are in your walk with the Lord will you offer yourself to God?  
Will you open our hearts to God and accept the relationship God offers us in Jesus Christ?*

*DeColores!*