



---

Title	⇒	“Grace Happens”
Scripture		Isaiah 9: 2; Luke 2: 10-11
Minister		The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
Place		Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON
Date		December 24 <sup>th</sup> , 2011
Calendar		Christmas Eve
Note		This text is an approximate rendering; this message was visually animated

---

Minister: Peace be with you  
**Congregation: And also with you**

“Those who lived in a land of deep darkness...  
To you is born this day... a Saviour”



I saw the bumper sticker on the little Toyota Camry: “(blank) HAPPENS.” I say ‘blank’ and not what the actual word was because I wouldn’t want to repeat it in good company like this. A sibling has cancer. You get one of those much-feared pink slips at work. BLANK HAPPENS. We nod.

A few days later I saw a different bumper sticker. GRACE HAPPENS. But it so often seems that the stories of ‘grace happening’ only make it so far as the editing room floor. But they’re still there. A positive pregnancy test. A safe refugee family. BLANK HAPPENS. GRACE HAPPENS. Which is your world?



I have gained a new friend in the past year. His name is Kennon Callahan. He tells this story about being a baseball coach.<sup>1</sup> It will illuminate the Gospel for us. Here is what he says:

It was the 9<sup>th</sup> inning. We had ‘last bats.’ We were 3 runs behind. There were 2 outs. No one was on base. We were playing late that Saturday night for the citywide championship. We were waiting for the inevitable end. Our next batter hit a single and made it to first. Our next batter had the good sense to stand there and do nothing. He got a walk. We now had two men on base. Our next batter hit a blazing grounder to the shortstop, who bobbled the ball. We now had the bases loaded! The citywide championship was once again within our grasp. The excitement, the cheers, the carrying-on were all amazing to behold. Our people in the stands were on their feet, cheering to high heaven. *Pause.*



Friends, it’s Christmas Eve—and there’s a problem. This is the time of year to ask the kinds of questions about what kind of world we want to live in—the BLANK HAPPENS world or the GRACE HAPPENS world. But there’s noise. Commotion. I know some of you still don’t have all your Christmas shopping done. We rush and try to keep a white-knuckled grip on our sanity. We charge forward hoping for the best—hoping to come out okay on the other side. But if ever there was a time to ask the big questions about this one single life we have, *this is it!* We’re not *supposed* to just come out okay, no worse for wear. Something is *supposed* to happen to us. Or are we content with a BLANK HAPPENS vision for the world?



Back to the ball diamond: Amidst all this clamour of being back in contention for the citywide championship, Bobby—the batter on deck—had gone to the plate. When my guys saw who was standing in the batter’s box with the citywide championship now resting on the line, the words they shared with their beloved coach are words I cannot share in this good company. Bobby had struck out every time he went to bat that season. Quick background. Bobby’s father had come to me months before and said, ‘We were in our forties when he was born. He has never been on a team. We think it would be helpful to Bobby’s development if he could just practice with your team. Not play, just practice. Maybe during the game, he could serve as batboy, or something. We think it would help him.’

I said to Bobby’s father, “I have a problem. My philosophy is whoever comes to practice plays. What you can count on and depend on is when Bobby comes to practice, he will play. I’ll try to see that he doesn’t get into a spot where he is over his head.” Oops! He was clearly over his head late that Saturday night.

Bobby, you see, was a sucker for high, outside pitches. Sometimes, coaches make interesting decisions. I thought about our season as a team. I looked to the stands and saw two parents, fearful, anxious, worried, not certain they really wanted their son to be standing at that point in the galaxies he was currently occupying. I said to the team, “We’ve come through the season together as a team. We finish the season as a team. Bobby stays.” The words that greeted that announcement are words I had not heard before. They figured the championship was lost. *Pause.*



Hear what it says in Isaiah’s prophecy, and also the Gospel of Luke:  
 “Those who lived in a land of deep darkness...  
 To you is born this day... a Saviour”

It’s a GRACE HAPPENS announcement! And it’s this surprising grace that pours the foundation of the statute of our being. Or at least it’s supposed to. But why then are we still so cynical? How do we get out of our rut? How do we get out of the rut of always assuming the worst, and that we ultimately live in a BLANK HAPPENS world?

The first revolution in thought is in how we answer one question—and it might be the most important question you ever answer in this one single life we are given: How am I going to be reborn to honour this Prince of Grace? That’s the question: How am I going to be reborn to honour this Prince of Grace? That’s it—especially since we have so often and so radically forgotten this essential *transformative* part of the Christian faith. Best-selling author Timothy Keller says it in three parts: “everyone is wrong, everyone is loved, and everyone is called to recognize this and change.”<sup>2</sup> This change—this altering our life so that we honour this Prince of Grace—is called rebirth.



Back to the game: Bobby standing at the plate. First pitch: high, outside, wild swing, strike one. Second pitch: high, outside, wild swing, strike two. Third pitch: high, outside, no swing. Bobby was tired from the first two swings. Ball one. Fourth pitch: high, outside, wild swing. The best way to describe what happened is, the ball hit the bat! With just enough force that it sailed just high enough over the first baseman’s outstretched glove. It landed fair. The first baseman turns, hunting and searching for the ball, knowing the game is at hand. My guys are running! The man from third was virtually home. Everyone was running, except for one person, Bobby. My guys encouraged Bobby, helped him know where he needed to be next. With a kind of dazed expression on his face, Bobby headed for first. He had never been there before. One run scored.

The pitcher was still on the mound, in shock so there was no one covering first base. By the time the first baseman found the ball, Bobby was pretty much there. So he threw home to force that out. With the confusion of the moment, he hurried his throw, threw high, and the ball went into the cage. Our second run scored. While the catcher was chasing the ball, Bobby rounded first, heading toward second. The only way the catcher could see to win the game now was to try to throw out the man who had come from first and was heading into third in a diving slide. The catcher threw the ball through the third baseman's legs out into left field. We've all seen this before. When things start going wrong, they begin to collapse all over the field. Three runs had scored.

The only player still running the bases was Bobby, who was headed to second. The left fielder threw the ball; it went high over the baseman's glove and headed back out into right field. Bobby rounded second, getting up a head of steam. One of the things Bobby knew how to do best was run. Meek, quiet, shy Bobby. He had learned to run mostly through first and second and third and fourth and fifth and sixth grades and beyond, because the teasers, the bullies in each class would pursue him, jeer him, taunt him, try to beat him up. So over the years, even as he was bashful and timid, the one thing Bobby has learned to do was run—mostly away from people who were chasing him. But something happened out there at about second base. Now, Bobby was running *for* the team—it was a new experience for him! Up to that point in his life he had been running *from* people; now, for the first time, he was running *for* people. His team mates were going berserk, yelling “Run, Bobby! Run, Bobby!” With a full head of steam, he rounded third base, heading for home!

Meanwhile, the ball was found. He threw. It bounced in the dirt. Just as it was bouncing into the catcher's outstretched glove, Bobby lunged with all his being, so that his hand would touch the plate before the catcher could get the ball. He gathered up everything he had so he could do his overwhelming best for the team. His hand reached for the plate before the catcher had the ball! We were four runs to three! Citywide champions!

My guys did the right thing. They picked Bobby up, put him on their shoulders, and carried him all around the field. He was the hero of the season. I saw two parents sitting in the stands, tears gently streaming down their cheeks. Their son had come of age. Bobby was reborn. A baseball team was reborn. Two parents were reborn.



Friends, I have this confidence: God makes all things new. Even us. And especially at Christmas. Maybe you are the parents in the stands: warm tears running down their cheeks, used to a life of uncertainty and struggle. Reborn. Maybe you are Bobby: unpopular and mocked as a dead weight in an achievement-hungry world—a disappointment. Reborn. Maybe you are the players: a voice in the clamouring crowd just waiting for an amazing moment to change your outlook on the world. Reborn. Maybe you are the coach, after all what do parents so often become other than coaches: influencing key decisions and with a chance to tip the scales either way. Reborn.

Sometimes you need one good surprise to see other really good surprises all around you.  
“To you is born this day... a Saviour”

### GRACE HAPPENS.

Is this the Bobby-kind-of-Christmas when it all starts to happen for you?



<sup>1</sup> I have heard Kennon tell this story a few times. It is here adapted from his telling in: Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys for Living: Possibilities for a Whole, Healthy Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 1ff.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 52.