

“Giving Thanks for the Lions”

Daniel 6:6-10; I Thessalonians 5:16-18

November 22, 2020

As we cozy around our Thanksgiving turkeys, with fewer people perhaps this year than usual, my hope for us all is that we'll deeply connect with our gratitude for all God's blessed us with. For most of us, the Holiday season arrives, and we get a few moments of rest to survey the contours of our life. There, like FD the other day before worship, most of us will be touched deeply in our hearts by a profound thanksgiving of our blessings. We're grateful for the burnished turkey which adorns our table and stuffing made with Neese's sausage and green bean casserole and pumpkin pie, heavily laden with freshly whipped cream, and....

Got off track there a bit, easy to do when I get to talking about food.

But there, at the Thanksgiving table, we are thankful. For family, for friends, for health, for many things no doubt. At the first church I served as an ordained pastor at, they had a tradition, which was awesome for pastor's heading into the Advent cycle. The tradition was that (and here's why I loved it) INSTEAD of a sermon, the congregation members would rise and tell everyone in the sanctuary exactly what they were thankful for on that particular year.

It was a nice tradition, it really was. People would cite the usual things for the most part – a spouse, the church, the roof over their heads. One little boy, a real wild card, announced he would be thankful once the service the over.

Now I don't know about you, but I always find myself especially MORE thankful when things turn out the way I envisioned them. Like, I imagine having a great wife and kids and BOOM, there they are. But, on other occasions, when I don't get what I wanted or thought I deserved, it's hard for me to process Paul's admonishing us all to be thankful, for everything. **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 reads, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”** Which, to my thinking, includes being both cheerful and thankful when either my beloved Braves lose a big game. Still haven't quite mastered that ability...yet but the Braves sure give me enough opportunities to practice.

But then I remember a story.

You know the kind. The type that when you hear it, you know that its impact struck so deep that you're likely never to forget it, or the lesson it taught. The Prodigal Son is a story like that, isn't it? There are others, to be sure. Some Biblical, some not.

Christian pastor Frederick Buechner tells a story of being in the Army on bivouac. It was the wintertime somewhere near Anniston, Alabama and he was eating his meager supper out of a mess kit in the cold, drizzling rain. All around him was mud, the sun was disappearing in the west and the cold was creeping in.

It had been a long day and Buechner was still hungry after finishing his dinner. He noticed that another soldier nearby had left something that he wasn't going to eat. It was a turnip. He asked the man if he could have it. The man said yes and tossed it towards him. Buechner missed the catch and the turnip landed squarely in the mud. He wanted it so badly that he reached down to the ground and began eating the turnip, mud and all.

Time deepened and slowed down. With a lurch of the heart, he suddenly understood that not only was the turnip good, so was the mud and the rain and the cold. Even the Army that he'd dreaded for months was good as well.

Buechner writes – **“Sitting there in the Alabama winter – with a mouthful of cold turnip and mud, I could see that if you ever truly took to heart the ultimate goodness and joy of things, even at their bleakest, the need to give thanks to God for it would be so great that you might even have to go out and speak to the birds of the air about it.”**

But there's the rub. We may in fact find a way to be thankful for all of our blessings. Both those things which've wallowed in mud (Literally and figuratively) AS WELL AS those that have not and turned out exactly the way we wished them to.

But, whether Republican or Democrat, are we thankful for the outcome of the many elections in this country?

Are we thankful for quarantine?

Are we grateful for COVID?

And, I'll be the first one to tell you, most of the time, I AM NOT. Wish I were, but I'm kinda afraid lighting might well splinter this nice pulpit this morning were I to say otherwise. In between the long hours of isolation from friends and family, the facemasks, the many challenges to life during this time. And that's to say nothing of the constant drone of worry and fear which dog our every step.

Are we thankful for all of that?

And, let's be candid, I'm sure I'm not the only one here who's encountering some deep questions about the nature of God and His providence. After all, to quote that old, unanswered query – *“why do bad things happen to good people?”*

If not because of COVID, there are sure to be events and occasions in which things have gone do disastrously, that we simply can't help but wonder if God is somehow punishing us.

I confess I've uttered another age-old question – “Why me?” Which, when you say it enough, sounds remarkably similar to “Whiny.” And I'm not sure Webster's would agree but, in my book, if there's an antonym to thanks, it's whine. I've certainly been that since mid-March when the kids' routine weekend at home became the end of the school year, then never darkening the doors again.

Well, I may not always be but thankfully the Bible teaches me that there is a way to encounter even extreme difficulty with thankfulness lodged as deep within our heart as change in our sofas. On more occasions in the Scripture than my 25-minute sermon would permit, characters find themselves giving thanks.

My particular favorite is from the book of Daniel.

Just as a refresher, Daniel is among some of the people who are carted off into exile in Babylon. The Babylonian empire was vast and mighty. They blew through Jerusalem like a knife through warm butter and decided to carry off the best and the brightest to expand their empire.

One of those men was Daniel. He's noted fairly early on in his time there as being particularly able-minded. In fact, he's so capable that, soon, the Emperor himself, Nebuchadnezzar gives Daniel a high-posting in his administration. Daniel thrives there until such jealousy arises within other nobles that they conspire against him. Knowing him to be a faithful Jew, the envious courtiers suggest a law that for thirty days, ONLY Nebuchadnezzar can be prayed to or asked for anything.

The punishment for any offense?

Being cast into a den of ravenous lions.

Now look, COVID stinks but what if you lived under the threat of death were you not to give your absolute allegiance and devotion to a tyrannical despot? I gotta think that's just a little bit worse than our present condition.

So, it always astounds me as to what Daniel does next. Knowing that his life would be forfeit for doing so, Daniel gives thanks to God.

“When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.”

The man thanked God three times daily.

I wanna ask sometimes, “Hey, Daniel, what exactly are you thankful for?” I mean the city of your youth lay in cinders thousands of miles from where you now are forced to reside. Everything you once had or thought about your future is now unalterably changed. And now, just for praying, you're going to be lion fodder?

But that's exactly what Daniel does. Gives thanks. Three times a day. Which, as we learned, has been his practice three times a day though his entire ordeal. Three times a day in a cart being led away from your home. Three times a day when you and your friends are forced to take on new responsibilities, new names even. Three times a day knowing that even doing so would get him fed to lions.

So, I can't help but think that Daniel discovered a way to truly live out the fullness of what 1st Thessalonians reminds us of – **“to be thankful for everything.”** In another way of speaking, Daniel was thankful, even for the lions which could really truly devour him.

Are we thankful for the lions in our life?

Because Daniel, knew. Knew what was coming and yet STILL gives thanks to God.

I can't help but wonder why?

I look to another well know Biblical story for the answer.

Abraham, that wandering Aramean who strikes a covenant with God to be a blessing to the world. Do you remember the rest of his story? Well, he's 70 years old when he leaves kith and kin to follow God's plan. The plan is to make Abraham a blessing to the nations forever. This, of course, would require Abraham and his wife Sarah to have a son. They are both well-beyond child-bearing years and so, hearing God's plan to give them both a son, they LAUGH.

When their child arrives, they give thanks to God and name the child, Isaac (which means laughing in Hebrew, by the way.)

As you may well imagine, the child is adored. I mean, here before both of them sits and laughs in that infectious way children do.

So, it is a huge surprise when God says this to Abraham – "He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

I get teared up even thinking about it.

I get angry when I hear how Abraham responds – "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac."

How does ANY MAN DO THIS?

More importantly though, why WOULD GOD DO THIS?

Abraham, a man of faith just as strong as Daniel, knew though. And so, he does saddle his donkey and take his son, exactly as God commanded. It all seems so heartless, so cruel until we get to the next verse we might just miss.

"Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and we come again to you." WE will be back. Meaning, even though he doesn't know how in the world God will accomplish it. He knows – God will find a way. God will figure a path. The two of them, Abraham and Isaac WILL return."

As we all know, as Abraham swings the axe, a lamb replaces his son. Both Abraham AND Isaac do return down to the other men. While he swung the axe, Abraham knew – God would find a way.

Daniel, I'm guessing, knew that too. Now, did he know that those hungry lions would be held at bay through a long and scary night? No. But Daniel knew, God would find a way.

Do we know that?

Do we live that out in our lives?

God will find a way for us through the COVID, through the missed relatives and blown parties and boring quarantines and fear and sadness. *God will find a way because HE ALWAYS Does.*

There may come a day when it feels as if you have nothing, nothing at all in the world to be thankful for. Maybe that day for some of us, is today. Hear the good news. God WILL FIND A WAY for you. Now, it might not be what you're envisioning right now. Whatever that is, is probably more our will than God's. But God will forge a path. I mean, if he can make a 90-year-old woman give birth and a man avoid consumption by hungry lions.

And, when you realize that. When that awareness really sinks deep down into the fiber of who you are. Guess what? You're going to be crazy-thankful. In fact, you and I will encounter the Holy Spirit within us, making us thankful for everything. Allowing our hearts to overflow with gratitude over all manner of things which enter our lives, good and bad.

I am reminded here of a well-known story from Corrie Ten Boom. I'm sure that you've likely heard it before but it, like that Prodigal story, sticks to you like white on rice.

So, Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch Jew living during the specter of Nazi occupation. She and her sister, Betsie believed that helping Jews escape was their mission from God and they set about doing so. Sadly, they were caught by the Gestapo and ultimately end up at Ravensbruck, a concentration camp.

There, Corrie and Betsie encountered the kinds of deplorable sites and situations we shudder when we read about in our history books.

Vance Cristie puts it this way – "In their barracks, they were shown to a series of massive square platforms, stacked three levels high and placed so close together that people had to walk single-file to pass between them. Rancid straw was scattered over the platforms, which served as communal beds for hundreds of

women. Corrie and Betsie found they could not sit upright on their own platform without hitting their heads on the deck above them. They lay back, struggling against nausea that swept over them from the reeking straw.

“Suddenly Corrie started up, striking her head on the cross-slats above. Something had bitten her leg. “Fleas!” she cried. “Betsie, the place is swarming with them!” Descending from the platform and edging down a narrow aisle, they made their way to a patch of light. “Here! And here another one!” Corrie wailed. “Betsie, how can we live in such a place?””

Corrie suggest that they remember the Scripture passage they’d read tighter in devotion time that morning. I Thessalonians – “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

“We must give thanks, even for the fleas, Corrie insisted. Her sister could not.

Soon thereafter, Betsie would grow ill, unable to work outside. She was instead instructed to stay inside the dorm, helping to sew. That day, when Corrie came back, her sister was smiling like the Cheshire Cat.

“Corrie,” she said, “Today I found out why we give thanks for the fleas.”

She then went on to explain that it was the flea infestation which kept their Nazi prison guards OUT of the dorm to begin with – they didn’t want to get them so they stayed away.

Yes, it’s wonderful to give thanks for the roofs above our heads, the cars in our driveways and the turkeys adorning our Thanksgiving tables. And once you know Jesus, once you truly know God, you may well find yourself giving thanks for all sorts of things – muddy turnips, a den-full of lions, an awful command, fleas...COVID even.

May we all be thankful that God, no matter what, He finds a way for us.

Because when God delivers you from your misery, from your addiction, from your loss of a loved one, from anything really and you stand amazed at the power of our good and mighty God and be so thankful.

And, one day, when our days are ending, even there, God has made a way.

Jesus Christ. In Him we know, God has found us a way past the sting of death and into a world so wonderful it lies even beyond the scope of our present imagination.

And that, dear brothers and sisters, is why we can always be thankful – God will make a way for us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Scripture and Quotes

Daniel 6:6-10 – “Then these high officials and satraps came by agreement to the king and said to him, “O King Darius, live forever! All the high officials of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an injunction, that whoever makes petition to any god or man for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions. Now, O king, establish the injunction and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.” Therefore, King Darius signed the document and injunction. When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 – “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Frederick Buechner – “Sitting there in the Alabama winter with a mouthful of cold turnip and mud, I could see that if you ever truly took to heart the ultimate goodness and joy of things, even at their bleakest, the need to give thanks to God for it would be so great that you might even have to go out and speak to the birds of the air about it.”

Genesis 22:2 – “He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

Genesis 22:3 – ““So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac.”

Genesis 22:5 (New International Version)– He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

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