

“Morning by Morning... Thanksgiving”

Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon Exodus 16 and Acts 16:19-34

The floor would have been damp and cold, made of either stone or dirt, and offered little comfort to the men after they had been stripped and flogged. The air would have smelled rank with the stench of unwashed and beaten bodies crammed together in a communal cell. The chains, which were often rusted from the sweat of past prisoners, probably chafed and cut at Paul’s and Silas’ ankles, while their stomachs growled from lack of food. There was no meal service provided in Roman prisons. Prisoners were dependent upon benefactors outside of the prison to provide their food and other amenities. But there had been no time for Paul and Silas to contact such a benefactor in Philippi. There was no light provided by the Roman guards either, and the innermost cells had no windows, (which is why a little later in the story the guard could not see Paul and Silas and the other prisoners in their cell, when the earthquake awoke him in the wee hours of the morning.) So, after the disciples’ act of setting a slave girl free landed them behind bars themselves, they had little choice but to sit, hungry and cold and hurting in the pitch-black darkness. No one would have blamed them if they had cried out in the darkness to God for betraying them or complained about their circumstances. No one would have been surprised if they had given up on Christ and done whatever they could – worshiped Roman gods, recanted the truth of the Gospel – in order to get out. But the disciples did not do any of these things. Notwithstanding their great suffering, they sat in the bowels of the prison singing. Paul and Silas turned that nasty little cell into a sanctuary and prayed and sang songs of praise to God while their new-found congregation of fellow prisoners listened.

This part of the story has always struck me as extraordinary. I know that the miracle part comes next – the earthquake that somehow managed to open all the doors and the stocks without collapsing ceilings on the prisoners. I know that the conversion of the prison guard is supposed to be the other amazing part of the story. Their captor becomes their benefactor, and a convert to boot. But it’s the singing that still gets to me in this story. Not only did the disciples maintain their faith in the midst of suffering, they were able through their faithfulness to witness to others in a powerful, life-saving way as well.

Do you feel like you could do this? I don’t know if I could if I was in prison. But I do know that this story gives us plenty to think about as we head into the season of Thanksgiving. Traditionally during this season, we all called upon to count our blessings. This is good to do, and essential to do this week and every week. But it is also easy to do when life is going well. It’s a lot harder when you feel as though the only things you have enough of to count are your losses or challenges. I keep thinking about the people in California who lost everything to fire in the past week: homes, cars, pets, jobs, sometime loved ones, all in one fell swoop, as well as those working their way through Mexico toward the U.S. after having to leave behind everything they knew in Central America. I keep thinking about people like Elaine Pagels, an author and theologian, whose story was in the paper this week. She’s written a book about what it felt like to

lose her only son to cancer at age 6, and then have her husband die falling off a cliff the following year.¹ For people in circumstances like these, it is not uncommon for thanksgiving to be replaced by anger, fear, and despair. Yet according to our tradition thanksgiving and faith go together. Lose the first for too long, and you may lose the second.

In our Westminster shorter catechism, the very first question, which we will answer as our affirmation in a little while, states that “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”² (The catechism was written in 1648, so you have to forgive the lack of inclusive language.) Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica that they were “to rejoice always, pray unceasingly, and give thanks in all circumstances,” (1 Thess. 5:16-18), and according to stories like today’s, he really did this notwithstanding beatings, imprisonments, and more. So, if he and the other disciples are our examples, and the Catechism correctly states our chief purpose, then the question is how do we find the ability to sing in the darkness? How do we genuinely give glory and gratitude to God when our lives are filled with challenges, or God-forbid, seem to be falling apart? Right now, we in this congregation are all hugely blessed compared to the people I named. But we are not without our difficulties and losses. Everyone faces challenges in life, large and small. How do we give thanks in the midst of them?

I don’t have any magic answers. But in considering the topic of thanksgiving this week I found myself giving thanks for the story of the manna in the wilderness for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it gives those of us who are not the sing-in-prison type personalities a far more attainable model to follow than Paul’s example does. The Hebrew slaves were far less saintly than Paul. They gave thanks, but they also complained. Actually, according to the Torah, they complained a lot when they were in the wilderness. Sure, God had just saved them from slavery and death in truly miraculous ways. But they were still stuck in a dessert with little to eat and no clear sense of where they were going and when they would get there. So, although Moses would have really appreciated it if they had broken out in song as they marched through the desert, instead of hearing hymns of praise to God, what Moses heard was a lot of complaining. “We have nothing to eat or drink. We miss the good food in Egypt. You brought us all this way to die. When are we going to get there?” It was enough to drive Moses crazy. Yet God did not smite the people for their ingratitude or complaining. Instead God heard them and helped them by sending them quail and manna. This tells us that we aren’t being unfaithful if we also complain sometimes or object to the harshness of life. Being thankful people is not the same thing as being Polyannas. It’s not the same thing as “dancing in the rain” either, if that expression means acting like we are enjoying getting soaked and cold when we really aren’t. When it comes to our relationship with God, we are allowed to grieve and rage and acknowledge when we find life hard.

¹ Charles, Ron, “*After her son and husband died, Elaine Pagels wondered why religion survives,*” THE WASHINGTON POST, Nov. 6, 2018, accessible at https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/after-her-son-and-husband-died-elaine-pagels-wondered-why-religion-survives/2018/11/06/83e2fb24-e1da-11e8-8f5f-a55347f48762_story.html?utm_term=.dc4bed777424. (Pagels’ new book is entitled *Why Religion?* (HarperCollins, 2018))

² *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part I: Book of Confessions*, (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 1994), 181.

But the *Exodus* story doesn't end with the complaining; it ends with the people collecting manna with gratitude, and so should ours. Otherwise our complaining may drive us away from, instead of toward the God who can help us. There's an old story about a man who decided to enter a particularly strict monastery in search of God. The head monk told him that they were sworn to total silence. They could not speak most of the time at all. But every ten years they were allowed to say two words. After the first ten years, the head monk approached the novice monk and indicated that he was permitted to speak. "Bed hard!" the man said, resuming his silence and work. After another ten years, the head monk approached the man, and this time he said, "Food bad!" After another ten years, the monk said, "I quit." The head monk shook his head and said, "I knew this was coming. You've done nothing but complain for the past thirty years."³

The story about the manna in the wilderness gives us permission to complain, but then it also shows us that a better use of our time is to look for the manna that God provides in response to our complaints. "What is it?" the Hebrews first asked when the substance showed up the next day because what they discovered wasn't the fleshpots and cucumbers that they had been complaining they lacked. "That's your bread from heaven," Moses explained. It wasn't like any bread they knew, leavened or unleavened. The manna was small and sticky like honey on the desert grasses. I picture it sort of like lacy pralines made of sap and seeds, or maybe rock candy. But whatever it was, it gave the Hebrews exactly what they needed for the day – enough protein, sugar, and grace to get through the day. "God is with you," the manna proclaimed morning after morning. "God will take care of you."

The strange food was their lifeline in more ways than one. It was so precious to them, in fact, that notwithstanding Moses' instructions, their first inclination was to want to stockpile it. If they had a traveling larder filled with manna, then at least they would know that starving to death wasn't in their future. But other than the memory jar's-worth I talked about with the children this morning, God wouldn't let them do that. You see God didn't want them grounding their sense of security in the manna. God wanted them grounding their security in their relationship with God. God wanted them to look for sustaining divine blessings morning by morning.

If we do this, if we get up each day even when life is difficult, knowing that somewhere in that day that there will be manna, then it changes the way we see the world. Manna hunting requires us to direct our attention away from our grief and anger and unanswered question and toward the little things that make life worth living: like the simple gifts of getting to share the intimacies of daily living with loved ones, everything from the laughter and love, to the socks on the floor and the fights for the remote. Manna hunting opens our eyes to miraculous gifts, like having a friend to talk to, or a beautiful day to lift your spirits. There is manna in cardinals that show up when you're thinking of lost loved ones and in cards from strangers which remind you that you're loved. There is manna in naps and dappled sunlight, in new discoveries about

³ *Animating Illustration* accompanying "G-Rations," A sermon on Exodus 16:2-15, HOMILETICSONLINE, Sept. 21, 2014, retrieved Nov. 12, 2018 from <https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/>

ourselves and the world, and in the smells and sounds that remind you of past times of joy. Above all, there is manna in our “bread from heaven,” Jesus Christ, who is with us every hour of the day, showering us with grace and assuring us that we will never be alone. This is the manna that fed Paul and Silas even while their stomachs were empty. As Paul later told the Roman Christians, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God, neither hardship or distress, nakedness, peril or sword.” That is something to give thanks for every day, and more than enough reason to sing.

Like Paul, it was this divine grace that enabled Martin Rinckart, the author of the hymn we began worship with this morning, “*Now Thank We All Our God*,” to sing. Born in 1586 to a poor coppersmith, he became a priest in Eilenburg in Saxony just before the Thirty Years War began. So, his ministry began with soldiers moving into his home and plundering his food. But those ended up being the good times. In 1637, one-upping the war, the plague arrived. In one year, 8,000 people died. The whole town council and most of the other leadership were killed, so Rinckart ended up doing the work of three men. He personally cared for the sick and dying, burying more than 4,000 people. He managed the town and his church. Then after the plague came famine and still more deaths. Then after the famine came the Swedes, who demanded a huge tribute the townspeople didn’t have. Rinckart went to the general’s camp to beg for mercy but was denied it. So, he turned to the citizens who had followed him and said, “Come children, we can find no hearing, no mercy with men, so let us take refuge with God.” He fell on his knees and prayed with such earnestness that the general relented and lowered the tribute to 2,000 florins.

Basically, for the bulk of his life and all of his ministry, Rinckart had to struggle to keep himself, his loved ones, and his flock alive. He lost most of them. But his suffering did not crush his faith. Instead it inspired him to write songs of praise. Shortly before his death, he wrote the hymn that he is now most famous for, which says, “Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices, for wondrous things he has done, in whom this world rejoices. Who from our mothers’ arms, hath blessed us on our way, with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.” He had learned the ability to find the manna in his life.

There is a Hebrew saying which goes: “No matter how dark the tapestry God weaves for us, there is always a thread of grace.”⁴ I don’t really like the first part of that saying because I don’t think God weaves with darkness. Life does, but God doesn’t. God always weaves with light. But the point is that whether you call God’s grace manna or a thread, God always provides us with the help we need. We know this to be true through Christ. So, we always have reason to give thanks. As poet William Stafford once wrote in his poem called “*The Way It Is*”:

There is a thread you follow
It goes among
Things that change. But it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.

⁴ As cited in Russell, Mary Doria, [Thread of Grace](#) (New York: Ballantine Books, December 6, 2005).

You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.⁵

This Thanksgiving season, in addition to giving thanks for all the big things we are blessed with – homes and jobs, good health and safety, take some time to give thanks for that thread, which has the power to sustain us through good and bad. Thank God for the mercies you receive each morning when you wake up – the ability to get up, to love, to learn, to serve. Thank God for the listening ear and patient heart which puts up with our complaining. Thank God for the wisdom and strength which helps us to rebuild and change. Thank God for the salvation given to us through Christ which assures us our future is secure. And if and when you have a morning when you feel as though there is very little to give thanks for because you're stuck in the wilderness or the world is filled with challenges and loss, then give thanks to God for the manna God will most assuredly provide because God knows finding it each morning will help you. It will give you strength for the journey, and one day may even enable you to sing in the dark. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ See *The Way It Is* by William Stafford, posted Oct. 19, 2017 by Christina's World on Words for the Year, retrieved from <https://wordsfortheyear.com/2017/10/19/the-way-it-is-by-william-stafford/>