

“Thanksgiving in This New World”
November 22, 2020

Habakkuk 3:17-19
II Corinthians 1:8-14

2020 continues.

And now a new question comes to us: How will we mark—and even celebrate—Thanksgiving this year, in this new place to which we have come?

Some were hoping that large family gatherings might yet be possible during this pandemic—and even planned them. But for the most part those hopes have been dashed and those plans have been wisely changed.

Some were expecting to travel or to welcome guests—and those expectations have been adjusted.

The Washington Post offered an interactive map showing each county in the United States and the chances that at least one person in a gathering of ten or more people would have Covid-19. And here’s what we learn from that map: *Do not* gather together.

That’s also the message coming from the Centers for Disease Control and the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. I hope you will take their advice. I *encourage* you to take their advice.

Stay where you are and stay away from others.

It won’t always be this way, but this year is different. You know that.

So many of us, indeed most of us will find ourselves alone, or with a spouse, or with our nuclear family, here in Iowa City or its vicinity.

It is different, it is difficult—and in this year, it is good.

Let us begin with that.

Back in the old days—last year—ministers like me would stand up and encourage people like you to consider all that you have and to remember the less fortunate. I would encourage you as you gathered in large houses in large numbers to recall on Thursday the countless millions who are hungry, who are refugees, and the poor in our own land.

In our new reality, as we mourn the dead, as we fear for ourselves and those we love, as the various losses of this year seem to mount with each day, as we seek some normalcy in these abnormal days, rather than tell you something, I ask instead:

How will we give thanks?

And for what will we give thanks?

Adversity endangers our thanksgiving, doesn't it?

The temptation is to descend into despair, to succumb to bitterness, to indulge our regrets, and to let a materialistic view of life lead to anger or hopelessness.

When life is difficult, is there any other choice?

When we listen to all that the ancient prophet Habakkuk says, the answer is, "Yes, there is another way."

The third and last chapter of this short book is a psalm that rejoices in the God who marches forth to save the people. After recounting all that God has done—shaking the earth, making the nations tremble, and shattering the mountains—the prophet, who earlier lamented that God seemed indifferent to the cries of the people and slow to bring justice, comes to a new way of responding to the difficulties and challenges of the present:

"Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls—
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation."

In the midst of failure and destitution, we hear a cry of hope and confidence.

In the midst of all that leads us to give up, we hear a word of encouragement.

In the midst of emptiness, we hear an invitation to rejoice, give thanks, and sing.

Reflecting on those words of Habakkuk, Peter Gomes once said, "Thanksgiving begins not with our success and not even with ourselves. It begins with God."ⁱ

We give thanks because God is God, not because of what we have.

We give thanks because God is God, not because of who we are with or what is on our table.

The prophet rejoices because God is his salvation.

And God is our salvation as well—our wholeness, our health.

The experience and the response of Habakkuk were not unique.

Some six hundred years later, Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth about his recent experience: "We were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself."

And yet, he regards this as an occasion that calls for thanksgiving. The crushing despair that Paul knew—and that you might have known something like that at some time—on reflection creates a grateful heart.

The Prelude this morning was the hymn “Now Thank We All Our God.” Perhaps you remember the familiar words of the hymn written by Martin Rinkart in the seventeenth century:

Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,

Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices...

The second verse prays:

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,

With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;

When hear those words, we might think that this is a hymn of thanksgiving from those who are well-off, those who desire that the countless gifts and joyful hearts they have long known will continue into the future.

Not exactly. The hymn was written during the Thirty Years’ War. Rinkart was the only pastor in a walled city that served as a refuge for innumerable people fleeing the devastation of the war. When disease broke out in his community, he often buried as many as forty or fifty people in one day and is said to have officiated at four thousand funerals in one year.

Out of those crushing days, Rinkart would sing “Now thank we all our God...in whom this world rejoices”—and invite others to give voice to their gratitude growing out of adversity.

We look back and give thanks to God, because a spirit of thankfulness not only grows out of what we have but also out of what we have lost. The novelist Andre Dubus, who lost a leg in an automobile accident, writes about gratitude and its connection with other people. “We receive and we lose, and we must try to achieve gratitude; and with that gratitude to embrace with whole hearts whatever of life that can remain after the losses. No one can do this alone, for being absolutely alone finally means a life not only without people or God or both to love, but without love itself.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Those words help me with this season of Thanksgiving. Perhaps the dried bittersweet branches that decorate many tables are fitting symbols especially this year as we come to this time when we are invited to “embrace with whole hearts whatever of life remains after the losses.”

Life *is* fragile—we knew that already, but we’re learning it in such new and terrible ways this year.

An awareness of this fragility *can* lead to fear and to envy. And yet, an awareness of the fragility of life can also lead to a deepening sense of grace—God’s care for creation, and for us, in our prosperity and in many dangers, toils and snares. Trying to “achieve gratitude” is the work to which we are all called in these days.

Thanksgiving can be difficult during times of adversity. In faith, however, thanksgiving becomes a genuine possibility, a choice we make. Through tears of grief, in financial trouble, with worries

about health and concern for the future, we can *choose* to give thanks to the God who is our strength, who is even now opening new pathways and new possibilities.

How will we give thanks in these strange and difficult days?

We will begin with God, not with ourselves. We will lift up our hearts to the One in whom we live and move and have our very being. From this our gratitude may grow.

For what will we give thanks in these strange and difficult days?

With grateful hearts we will rejoice in neither our prosperity nor our adversity but in the God who is with us in both, the One who is our health and our wholeness. We will remember that everything is a gift—our lives, our loves, this earth, these days—all gifts that call forth our thanksgiving.

This Thursday—and at all times—let us give thanks to God who is our strength, who gives so that we may in turn give thanks.

I hope that Thanksgiving will be different this year, filled with appreciation, with hope, and with deep gratitude for this precious gift of life in this challenging time.

And let us all pray as Thomas á Kempis once did: “Write Thy blessed name, O Lord, upon my heart, there to remain so indelibly engraved, that no prosperity, no adversity shall ever move me from Thy love.” Amen.

ⁱ Page: 3

Peter Gomes, Sermons, pg. 233

ⁱⁱ *Inspired* pg. 40.