

“Give Thanks In All Circumstances”

*Deuteronomy 8:7-18, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18
(October 11, 2020)*

I don't know about you, but this may be one of the strangest Thanksgivings that I've lived through. Because it's situated in one of the strangest years that I've lived through.

A year of lockdown, social distancing and people wearing masks. A year of being careful about what I touch; how close I come to others — still no guarantees.

A shrinking economy. Depressed and anxious people. And no clear end in sight.

“Give thanks in all circumstances,” says the apostle Paul.¹ Are we to be thankful in the midst of all this?



Perhaps some of you have lived through tougher times. When I consider those in our world, even now, who are homeless, victims of war and violence, those who lack adequate housing or food or water, I begin to think maybe things for us are not so bad.

It's not to say we haven't suffered losses. Because we have. Community has been diminished. Church services have been cancelled. Jobs have been destroyed. Businesses stressed. Travel restricted. Governments struggle to find their way.

But Covid can't take away everything. We still live in a beautiful world, full of many gifts.



Some of you may know that I have a part-time job in my retirement, delivering mail for Canada Post. A little while ago I had a rural route that took me out into the country, south of the city. Leaves were turning brilliant colours in the river valley. And farmers were harvesting the crop in warm, dry weather. And thousands of Sandhill cranes were flocking in the fields.

This fall on our evening walks, Lindsay and I have enjoyed the sound of migrating snow geese making their seasonal trek. Wave upon wave of them flying high overhead, their bodies lit up by the brightness of the moon.

We've also sat on the deck and admired the yellow leaves of our neighbour's birch tree set against the backdrop of a brilliant blue sky.

This weekend, we'll enjoy a meal with some loved ones, those in our immediate bubble.

I wonder ... what blessings have you received in your life recently?



“Give thanks in all circumstances.”

Would it be easier to give thanks if everything was well? If there was no pandemic, and the world was ticking along as usual? If our lives were flourishing in every part of our existence?

Is that even realistic to imagine? Isn't there always something that tries us and challenges us?

On the surface, I suppose, it may seem easier to be thankful in good times. But I'm not sure it always works that way.

We can name people around us who seem to have everything, but aren't very happy. And conversely, we can think of those who have suffered greatly yet, beyond all reason, seem content.

Perhaps gratitude does not depend entirely on outward circumstances: On what we have, or don't have. On material prosperity, or lack of it.

Maybe gratitude is more resilient than we think! Maybe it comes from some deeper place.

Maybe it depends more on an inner disposition than conditions that surround us. Maybe even, at times, it can defy those conditions, surprising us with joy in our darkest days!



In our scripture reading from Deuteronomy we hear Moses' message for the people of Israel after their escape from slavery in Egypt. It's both a promise and a warning.

First the promise: “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing ...”

Such a good and special place! “You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that God has given you.”



But then this warning: “Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God ... When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself,

forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness ...”

In other words, God will bring great blessing to your lives. But it will be easy to develop a form of amnesia — a “great forgetfulness” — that will dissolve the memory of all that God has done. That will remove God from your awareness. So that all you can see is your own self, your possessions, your accomplishment.

Prosperity can shrink the universe, depriving us of wonder and mystery and holiness. Putting the focus entirely on our own selves. “See what I have? See what I’ve accomplished?”



I don’t know if any of you are fans of The Simpsons or not. Those cartoon characters can sometimes reflect back to us things about ourselves we’d prefer not to acknowledge.

In one episode Bart is asked to offer thanks at a family meal. He speaks with a cheeky irreverence: “Dear God,” he prays, “we bought all of this stuff with our own money, so thanks for nothing.”

Can you hear any echos from the book of Deuteronomy? “When things go well in the land of promise, don’t be thinking you got all this for yourself.”



We live in a society that encourages hard work, independence, innovation, and that rewards human accomplishment. These are all fine things!

But the flip side of it is that we can become proud of ourselves, thinking that we did it all. Which is a form of self-centredness. An ugly twist in our humanity which the Bible calls “sin.”

When we put ourselves at the centre of the universe, we forget about God. And we forget about others too.

“The healthiest people I know,” writes Pastor John Thomas, “are not the ones who delight in being the proverbial self-made man or woman. The healthiest people I know are those whose lives express a deep gratitude for everything and everyone that has reached across a boundary and border to enrich and embrace them.”²

We are not independent individuals. We are made to live in community, to live in dependence on God and one another. That is a much healthier way to live! Lives of interconnection, lives of mutual care, lives of deep relationship.



The Hebrews were in danger of forgetting the foundational story of their lives.

A foundational story is that narrative we carry within us. A story that tells us our history, where we've come from and who we are. A story that helps us make sense of the world and shows us our place within it.

So what's your story? The story you tell yourself over and over again? The story you told your children when they were young? The story you refer to when you've lost your way, or when you have an important decision to make?

Foundational stories root us in a sacred past and guide us into a promised future. So what exactly were the Hebrew people in danger of forgetting?

Moses said, Don't forget the One "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness ... He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know ..."

It's the story of the Exodus. Of God's gracious intervention in the lives of a people who were enslaved, to set them free. God brought them to a better place, a place of life and human flourishing.

It's a love story, really, in which the God of all people and all creation, reaches out to rescue this forgotten people, so that the whole world might finally be blessed.

It is, above all, a story of grace. A gift given — which is what grace is all about. For this people could take no credit for their escape. On their own they were powerless.

But God broke their chains, and stood up to Pharaoh, and parted the waters. And sank chariots and armies that pursued them.

God provided for their needs in an inhospitable place. God brought them to a new and promised land.

"Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the LORD your God."

Remember. Because it will be so very easy to forget.



Followers of Jesus have a similar story to share. It's Chapter Two, if you like, in the ongoing saga of God's grace.

It's the story we tell, in one way or another, every Sunday when we come to church: That the loving God of all creation infinitely cares for us! This God has reached out to us in the person of Jesus. By his life, death and resurrection he gives new life to captives and sets us free!

Because of God's great gift we have hope in a promised land. God invites us to take our place in a new creation — a world restored, redeemed, made new.

“By grace you have been saved,” writes the apostle Paul, “through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”³

Don't say to yourself, “Look what I accomplished!” Because it's not about you. It's about everything the God of life and love has done to bless you. And to bring you out of your own small self, and into relationship with God, and with one another.

But you know this, right? Surely you haven't forgotten the story?



Professor David Lose writes, “Gratitude draws us out of ourselves into something larger, bigger, and grander than we could imagine and joins us to the font of blessing itself.”⁴

Remember I said that prosperity can shrink our universe, so that everything focusses on a single, solitary “me.” Well grace has the opposite effect. God's gift of grace expands the universe and puts something other than ourselves at the centre.

Grace focusses on the gifts of our Creator. The abundant gifts that all are given, whatever the circumstances, whatever the time or place we find ourselves to be in.



What is the foundational story of your life? Do you have one? Would you like one? Could it be this one?

I've come to believe that God's good grace is the origin of everything. Every breath I breathe, every step I take, everything I am and all that I possess — it comes from the hand of a generous and loving God. A God who blesses me in countless ways — on good days and on bad. In Covid times, in prosperous times, in every time.



In a church I served there was a gentlemen who lived to be a great age. He was 104 when he passed away. He was a kind and lovely person, faithful in his support of the church and its ministry, generous to the community and to his neighbours. He was never self-promoting but rather self-effacing, humble and always willing to serve.

I'd greet him at the door after the service on Sunday. I'd say, “Mike, it's great to see you.” And he would quip in response, “It's great to be seen!”

We'd laugh at that bit of wittiness. But there was a more serious side to it as well: Mike was simply glad to be alive. And he counted each day as a gift. “It's good to be seen.”



Thanksgiving is about recognizing that giftedness and responding appropriately:
With gratitude. With generosity.

With acknowledgement of God, the source and origin of all good things. And
with loving care for others in the faith community and beyond — who are also
loved and blessed by this gracious God!

Today I encourage you to live in a bigger world. To see beyond the challenges of
the moment — however real they may be.

To remember a story that situates you in a relationship with a loving God who
blesses you in abundance. And who calls you to share your gifts in loving
relationship with others.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Amen.

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

² John Thomas, “Gratitude Is More Than Saying Thanks,” October 10, 2004. http://day1.org/810-gratitude_is_more_than_saying_thanks, (Accessed Oct. 8, 2014.)

³ Ephesians 2:7-9.

⁴ David Lose, “Dear Working Preacher: Second Blessing,” Monday, October 07, 2013. <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2796> (Accessed Oct. 7, 2014.)