

And When He Had Given Thanks

As you know, this Thursday is Thanksgiving. If you were here last Wednesday evening you know we got a headstart on the turkey and dressing. Thank you to Paula Hooper and all of her team that did such a great job in preparing that delicious meal. I'm thankful for so many wonderful volunteers that serve in every area of our church. Blessings to you!

These past 20 months may have left some of you dreading Thanksgiving this year. You aren't sure what you have to be thankful for. You had covid and now can't taste or smell the turkey or pumpkin pie, the company shut the doors and you lost your job, you lost family members and friends this year, you face the holidays alone. Exactly what do you have to be thankful for? **Thankfulness (gratitude) is an attitude of the heart. It isn't based on circumstances or possessions, on what you have or don't have; it's not based on gain or loss, it is based on what we know, what we understand.** Circumstances can be difficult, overwhelming, but we can still be thankful, because of what we know, of what we understand. Allow me to read something Dr. George Wood shared about the history of Thanksgiving.

It was in September of 1620 that a group of 102 persons, men, women and children, left Plymouth, England for what they hoped to be Virginia. They were Puritan Separatists, those who were breaking from the Church of England...Many of these same 102 people had left England 12 years earlier in 1608 to go to the Netherlands hoping that in the Netherlands they would find a greater freedom of worship. They returned however by way of England as they were on their way to America in order to pick up more persons who would be going to the New World. Their boat Speedwell, which they had sailed away from the Netherlands in, then left with a larger ship, which they picked up in England named the Mayflower. Twice they set out from England on the Speedwell and the Mayflower. And twice they turned back because the Speedwell proved to be unseaworthy.

Finally, all of them being in the Mayflower journeyed for a distance of some 65 days of rough passage over the Atlantic until they came to Massachusetts. To Cape Cod. Rough winds and errors in navigation had resulted in them landing up in the New England coast instead of the gentler territory of Virginia. They landed at Provincetown, November 21, 1620. (Exactly 401 years ago today). And for a number of weeks after that tried to find what would prove to be a suitable place in which to establish a settlement. Finally, by the end of December in 1620 they located at Plymouth where they found a piece of ground with a clear pure stream with some cleared land as well as a hill that could be fortified for defense purposes.

During that winter poor and inadequate food, strenuous work and changeable weather made them very susceptible to sickness so that by the end of their first winter in the new world this colony had lost nearly one half of the 102 persons who had made the trip. In the spring (tradition says) [Native Americans] Samoset and Squanto came into the colony and introduced to the colonists the idea of using fish as fertilizer in order to yield a good crop. Late in the summer of 1621 the Pilgrims harvested their first crop, a bounteous crop for which in the autumn of that year of 1621 they held a three day feast with their new found [Native American] friends and

gave thanks to God. Nearly 150 years after this in 1789 George Washington, the first American President, proclaimed November 26th as a day of Thanksgiving. And for a while Thanksgiving was kept in certain years but it was not yet established as a national day until 1863 in the heart of the Civil War, some 242 years after the Pilgrims had landed, Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as a day of Thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father.

(Wood wrote), To me it is striking to note that in the historical instances which led to the giving of thanks on a special day that two of those times – mainly the Pilgrims and the time of Abraham Lincoln – came at moments in human history when persons were at the crossroads between cursing or giving thanks. The Pilgrims on that first autumn of Thanksgiving in 1621 could have chosen to have blamed and cursed the ground, the land, the whole sense of freedom which had driven them from the old world. They could have looked at their losses, turned to the past and they could have despaired. But in that moment they chose to look forward in faith to the future. They chose to hope in God. And by that act of thanksgiving they were symbolizing the desire of life to bless rather than to curse. It's striking also when the national [day of Thanksgiving], which we celebrate now, began in 1863 again the nation was at a time when an American President and the American people could have despaired of ever giving thanks. Then I think what a parallel there is for our own lives. That indeed it is often in the times that are the most dark and severe that for the people of God, the greatest thanksgiving arises.

All of us, as we examine the circumstances of our life, have to make a decision. Will we choose to live with gratitude and thankfulness? Will we give thanks to God or not? We have to choose whether we will bless the Lord or curse our life and our circumstances. Will we give thanks this year? We have to choose to be thankful - this year and every year.

Job is an example of someone who made that choice. If you don't know his story, it is told in the book of the bible that bears his name. To summarize, Job was the subject of an attack by the devil. Satan told God he believed the only reason Job served God and loved him was because of the blessings in his life. If the blessings of God were taken from him, Job would curse God. God knew Job better than Job knew himself. God also knew the discoveries Job was about to make about God, the devil, and himself, would be life changing.

Job was the wealthiest man in the east, blessed with family, possessions, land, good health. A benefactor and friend to all, and then suddenly, Job lost everything.

Picture him sitting at the Thanksgiving table. He thanked God for all of the material blessings he enjoyed, but as he is preparing to carve the turkey a servant rushes in to tell him all of his sheep, cattle, oxen and camels as well as all of his servants have been stolen or killed. His wealth and possessions are gone. But at least he has his family. Seven sons and three daughters and they are all close to one another. It's a great family. But then the door bursts open and another servant appears. Job's children were all at the oldest son's house celebrating a birthday

when a tornado tore through the house and all of his children were killed. Now his wealth is gone, his children are gone and then his health fails. His body is covered with painful sores. His marriage fails as his wife turns against him and says “why don’t you just curse God and die.”

Everything is taken from him. Everything is gone. Maybe it feels like that to you this year. You’ve lost too much. What do you have to be thankful for? That’s what Job is wondering. Then he realizes. He still has God! He has the one thing that cannot be taken from him, regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the losses, he has his relationship with the Lord. “Curse God” his wife said. Curse the one thing that matters? Curse the one thing that can’t be taken away? Never! The bible tells us Job mourned over the loss of his family as any father would do. He tore his robe and shaved his head, acts of a Jewish father in deep mourning, but notice what the bible says of Job’s response to all the loss. **“Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.’ In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.” Job 1:20-22**

Job was not without his moments, not without questions and moments of anger. He wanted God to stand before him like a man in the witness box so he could interrogate him. He wanted answers to all of the “why” questions, like many of us do, but ultimately Job made a choice to trust God, to hold to God even in the darkness, in the mystery. “Though God slay me, yet I will trust him.” He made a choice to trust and give thanks to God, in spite of all that happened. “The Lord knows the way I take and when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” I’ve still got a future. I’ve lost everything but the one thing that matters so I will cling to the Lord. I won’t accuse God. Instead I’ll trust him, worship him and hold fast to him. “I know my Redeemer lives and in my flesh I will see him. I choose to trust and give thanks in the good times and I will still trust and give thanks in the bad times.

Remember what I said, that gratitude and thanksgiving are based on what we know, what we understand. Our giving of thanks is rooted in God himself and in our relationship with him. Like Job, we know God, we know he loves us, we know he is working in spite of the circumstances and setbacks. It’s what we know and understand. Find him! Life and circumstances will try to pull you away from him, to separate you from your relationship with the Lord, but if you keep looking to him, nothing can separate you from Him or from his love. What did the Apostle Paul say? **“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither**

angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:38-39 All our losses combined still can't separate us from his love. It's dark, I get that. I don't understand, but he loves us still. Keep looking to Jesus. Keep giving thanks because he is with you still, even in the darkness and the loss!

Job gives us an example of what it means to approach life with a thankful heart even when we've lost much and there is another who showed us what it means to give thanks in spite of the circumstances. Think about these words we read every time we take communion. **“The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks...” 1 Corinthians 11:23-24**

On the night he was betrayed...he gave thanks. I am confronted by my lack of gratitude and thanksgiving when I read these words. I'm aware of how often my gratitude, my thanksgiving is based on circumstances rather than on my relationship with God, on what I know and understand. My giving of thanks is often situational rather than relational. Think of Jesus as he gathers in that room with his disciples, knowing what's facing him in the coming hours, and yet, on the very night of his betrayal, in spite of the circumstances, he gives thanks. Nothing burns hotter, deeper, longer than betrayal. Betrayed by a friend no less. One of those closest to him. But it wasn't only Judas. He is the one who betrayed him to the authorities, but all of the disciples scattered and ran when Jesus was arrested. Peter denied him. Jesus told them, “You will all scatter because of me.” Before the Sanhedrin, the Chief Priest, before Pilate and Herod, Jesus stood alone. On the night he was betrayed, knowing what was ahead, knowing all his friends would abandon him, Jesus still gave thanks.

Think for a minute about Job and Jesus. Job was wealthy and lost everything. Jesus was poor by comparison and yet what little Jesus had was stripped from him. Naked he hung on the cross, every possession gone. The soldiers gambled for his garment. Both Job and Jesus lost everything. Jesus too lost his family in the sense that some of his brothers didn't believe in him, not until after the resurrection apparently. His disciples who have been his family have fled in fear, forsaking him. His health is gone too as he is beaten and crucified with the weight of the sins of the world placed upon him, bearing our sickness and disease as well. Yet even at this moment, with all of this facing him, he is giving thanks.

What is he thankful for? Like Job, Jesus is thankful for the One thing he cannot lose. He

is thankful for the relationship with the Father. Thankful he can entrust his life, his future, his spirit into the hands of his Father. Thankful because he knows that ultimately, after losing everything, he will gain the greatest of victories, all in God's time and God's way. He's thankful that by being obedient to the father, in laying down his life, he will bring to salvation all who put their faith and trust in him. On the night in which he was betrayed he gave thanks because he knew His Father is the One who causes all things to work together for good to those who love him and who are called according to his purpose. He gave thanks because he knew even though he would cry out as one forsaken on the cross, even then the Father would not leave him in the grave but would raise him up as the firstfruits of all who would experience resurrection life. He gave thanks because not even death or the grave could separate him or us from the love of God. He gave thanks because of what he knew and what he understood and so can we! We know God is still at work, in spite of all we see or have experienced. His love remains.

I know it's been a rough year. So many deaths, so much loss and heartbreak, but regardless of desperate circumstances or the difficult situations we've faced or are now facing, we can give thanks to God. He is faithful. He is loving. He is good. He has redeemed us from sin and the curse and offers us eternal life through Christ. Sickness, death, heartbreak, betrayal, it doesn't matter. Not even death can separate us from his love. Even on a night when we are betrayed, we can still choose to give him thanks. It's what we know, what we understand.

The prophet Habakkuk asked, **“How long, O Lord, must I call for help but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save?” Habakkuk 1:2** The prophet looked at all the evil in the world and the stuff happening in his nation and perhaps to him personally and wondered if there was any reason to have thanksgiving that year. A couple of chapters later the prophet stands in awe of God's deeds and with new understanding he says, **“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” Habakkuk 3:17-18.** He decides he will still give thanks and rejoice, in spite of the circumstances, in spite of not having all the answers. He understands he is in the middle of the story and can't see the end just yet, and then Habbakuk says, **“The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.” Habakkuk 3:19.** The prophet decides he will give thanks, even in the midst of trouble, or betrayal, or questions, because he knows the

Sovereign Lord is still in control and will give him strength and enable him to climb on, regardless. Circumstances are bleak, but we will trust him and give thanks! Even on the night of heartbreak and betrayal, we can still give him thanks and watch as he gives us strength to climb on to higher heights. It isn't over yet. He isn't finished yet!

For someone today it feels as if you can't take another step, you simply can't go on. I challenge you to give God thanks and praise. He has brought you this far. Even though the stalls are empty and no grapes on the vine, He hasn't deserted you. His love is still surrounding you and he is preparing to take you to higher heights. He isn't finished yet. "And when he had given thanks." Who knows what may happen as you give him thanks! Remember, it's about what you know and what you understand. God is my refuge and my strength. A very present help in a time of trouble. I will trust him and give him thanks!