

Thanks and Lamentations

Given all that we've had to endure this past year (and still have to endure), it's weird to think of being thankful this year. ***Depressed? Angry? Full of resentment? Absolutely! But thankful? In 2020?! Are you kidding me?!*** (*Many can't wait for 2020 to be over. Why? What makes you think 2021 is going to be better? What if you find yourself in a few months longing for the "good old days" of 2020? That's a scary thought, isn't it?!*) I could go into all the many reasons why we can lament and be angry and depressed and not give thanks, but I don't have to. You know. The whole world knows. And yet... that's ***exactly*** why we gather here tonight. That's exactly why we dare to be so very different than everyone else (including many of our fellow Christians). We gather here tonight in the very presence of our Lord and Savior because we know that even in the midst of all our woes we do have so much to be thankful for. Let's let the ten lepers explain.

Why were they whooping and hollering and jumping for joy? ***Because something good had happened to them, right?*** They were healed. That makes perfect sense, and we all wish we could be in their shoes right now. Never mind the fact that only one of the ten returned to actually say "*thank you*" for the undeserved goodness shown to them. We get the message here, don't we? Only one out of the ten actually returned thanks for the benefits shown to him from Christ. That's not good, but that's not us, is it? No sir!

Okay... what about the thankfulness of the lepers ***before*** the miraculous healing took place? We don't hear a single word about these guys being thankful ***before*** something good happened to them. I guess that only stands to reason. After all, what did they have to be thankful for? They were "blessed" with a sickness that rendered them unclean. Not only could they not enter into the Temple area to offer up prayers for their own healing, but they couldn't even be within the city limits. Worse yet, they could have no contact with anyone, family included. They were banished and exiled to quarantine in the wilderness. That doesn't sound like a reason to be thankful, as I'm sure we can all relate. I suppose you could give thanks for the companionship of your fellow untouchables, but I doubt that any of them did. "*Dear Lord, thank you for sending me to live with a bunch of lepers as collectively we all wait to die alone. Thank you, Lord, for not only giving me a miserable lonely existence, but for allowing me to share in the miserable, lonely existences of these other nine guys.*"

Did these guys have reason to give thanks ***before*** the miraculous healing? The 2020 pity party says "absolutely not," but from the perspective of faith the answer is an absolute "YES!" God ***never*** left them. He ***never*** forsook them. He

never stopped providing for them. In fact, God used them and their circumstances as integral parts of His salvation plan. God chose these guys to be the ones who were going to return to town with the healing of Christ Jesus on their lips and all over their bodies. ***God ultimately had big plans for them and for all His people through them. Just think: We're still learning of God's goodness today because of these ten guys.***

That's easy for us to understand, but it's quite another thing to have to live out, isn't it? We certainly understand giving thanks to God when things are going well in our lives. But what about all the things that aren't going so well in your life? Do you still give thanks to God when things aren't going as planned, ***or do you pour out your soul in bellyaching and complaining?*** "Why God? Why me? What have I done to deserve this? Don't you know who I am? Don't you see all the good things I do? This is how you repay me?" We recognize this kind of bellyaching, don't we? Unfortunately, it comes all too natural to us when things aren't working out our way. It's nothing new. In fact, it sounds an awful lot like the writer of Lamentations. "My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is. My endurance has perished, and so has my hope from the Lord."

And even our thankfulness is sometimes not all that. How many of you here today are thankful for "everything" God has given you, but you know that you could be ***more*** thankful if God just hooked you up a little more, taking away more of the discomfort and giving you more of the good life? Folks: God is not your genie in a lamp, and giving thanks to Him is not some sort of "Let's Make a Deal" or "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." ***But that's often how we treat it, isn't it?*** That's often how we respond to God's grace and mercy and goodness. "What have you done for me lately? What can you do for me right now? Hook me up and answer this prayer and I'll show my thanks by doing this, that, and the other thing for you!"

But it's here in the very midst of our ***lamentations and bellyaching and sinful deal making*** that we recognize, through faith, that we do have plenty of reason to give thanks. It is here in the very midst of our Old Testament reading for this evening that we come face to face with our reason for hope and thanksgiving. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness."

Think about what this is saying. God is ***always*** faithful. We sometimes forget that in our unfaithfulness, don't we? God's love and patience and mercy for us has ***never*** been absent from any of us. We've been absent from Him; we've quarantined from Him; we've fled from Him, but He's ***always*** been right there with us, even in the midst of our trials and tribulations; in the very depths of our sinful sorrows. Unfortunately, if we're bold to confess, He's often ***in back of us*** as we so willingly walk (or flee) away from Him, going about our own ways, carrying

out our own plans and desires, *expecting Him to come along and rubber stamp His seal of approval all along the way.* And when our ways don't match up with God's ways, we don't render thanks. We point the finger and affix blame, the lamentations sounding forth. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is. My endurance has perished, and so has my hope from the Lord."* I haven't forsaken or forgotten you. I'm right here. Stop running away from Me. Repent and turn around and let Me hold you in My loving embrace.

My fellow redeemed: Our Lord's love and mercy endures **forever**. It is eternal. It never ceases... even in 2020; even in the midst of pandemics and fears (rational and irrational), wars and rumors of wars and social unrest and corruption and depression and family separation and any other woe you can think of. The mercy, grace, and love that your Lord has for you is stronger than all of this, and it endures forever. He reigns victorious in the midst of all this shadowy death and despair. Look no further than His cross as proof. In His eternal and limitless love, God has called you and made you His own, *in spite of* all that you are (not *because* of who or what you are). In His steadfast love and eternal mercy, He is always there for us, holding out His loving arms to us. Look no further than this holy feast table as proof. Honestly: Do you not have all the reason in the world to rejoice and give thanks?

As we now draw to a close, I will end by simply pointing you to the cross of Jesus Christ. O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good and perfect, and yet He still willingly suffered our justly deserved death and punishment for us. **This is how much God loves you!** Because of Jesus Christ, we can truly respond with thanks this day, and every day, because His steadfast love *never* ceases; His mercies *never* come to an end; they are new every single morning. *Great is God's faithfulness to us.* This is our reason to give thanks, not only this day, but every day and in every circumstance. In His name and to His glory... **AMEN.**