***PRAY WITH GRATITUDE!***

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Texts: Philippians 4:4-7 and Isaiah 12:2-6

We all have our talents. Mine, as identified by Sarah Wolf in a children’s message not long ago, is apparently being tall, which is helpful in decorating the top of Christmas trees but obviously means I am slightly less talented than Kent Diduch, Tom Roberts, and David Fry! My sister Mary Beth, who some of you know and who may well be joining us virtually this morning from Pittsburgh, has a particular talent that is useful at this time of year – it is a talent for gifts and shopping. For Karen’s birthday one year she gave her a very nice coffee maker, even though neither of us drink coffee, but my sister knew that we would need it when she came to visit. One year she got me a nice coat which would have been even nicer had it been in my size, but the coat was on sale and that was the only size available, she said; fortunately, the coat was her husband Mark’s size so the gift did not go to waste. Several times she has given to our daughter Emily a nice blouse or sweater that was so nice that Mary Beth bought an identical one for herself. As I said, she has a gift for gifts!

But she also has a gift for expressing gratitude for gifts. She writes lovely notes expressing thanks for any gift she has received, sometimes just the gift of time spent together, and those personally-penned notes are gifts in themselves. It is a practice she learned from our mom and is nurturing in her daughters, and maybe it is a practice that you follow as well: expressing thanks for gifts received. In many corners of our society such expressions of gratitude have become a lost art and an abandoned practice. And I wonder: are we less grateful these days or just less intentional or perhaps less formal in expressing our thanks?

The same question might be asked about our prayers. Do you give thanks to God when you pray, day to day, or have you abandoned that practice with prayers that lack any thanks-giving? Are you grateful to God for your blessings, whatever they may be, or do you take them for granted? And if you are grateful, how do you express that thanks to God? There is no mailing address to send to God your jotted thank you note. How then do you say, “Thank you, Lord”?

In his letter to the Philippians Paul writes, “*In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made know to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*.” Paul seems to think that prayer is an appropriate way to offer to God our thanks; but he also seems to suggest there is an integral relationship between our prayers and our peace – between lifting to God our thanks, joyful praise, and heartfelt petitions, and finding peace of mind, heart, and spirit. In short, he suggests that we approach our prayers – all our prayers – with an attitude of gratitude. As the German proverb puts it:

*Instead of complaining that the rosebush is full of thorns,*

*be happy that the thornbush has roses.*

It is not just seeing that the glass is half-full, not half-empty and leaking, but also recognizing and offering thanks for the divine hand that fills the glass for us, however full it may be!

Advent is, or should be, a season of gratitude, for we have much for which to be thankful. Often our prayers seem more like a visit to Santa’s lap, sharing the list of things we want or need, and while God invites those petitions, God also welcomes our thanks for the blessings we have already received. The gifts under the Christmas tree are wonderful, but they pale in comparison with the great gift of God’s presence among us in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago and the hope-filled promise of his glorious return one day. At the heart of those divine gifts is the promise that God is with us, not just in some spiritual way – though that too is a gift for which to be thankful each day – but in flesh and blood, present with us and among us. That assurance of God’s presence has offered God’s people reason to be hopefully, joyfully thankful for generations!

In the passage we heard from Isaiah this morning, the prophet tells the people: “*Great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*” Those words, spoken centuries before Jesus’ birth, offered comfort and peace to God’s people who were on the verge of being exiled to a foreign land. For people who had come to regard the Temple as the sign of God’s presence, the assurance that God was still with them, near to them, *in their midst*, offered strength with which to face the challenges that lay ahead in a foreign land. Israel’s great fear, uttered by the psalmist in words echoed by Jesus from the cross, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!*” was that God might abandon them out of frustration or anger with the people’s recurring unfaithfulness, that God might throw up divine hands and say, “*Enough is enough!*” and go find some other people to claim as God’s own. But, says Isaiah, the Lord will not abandon you! The Lord is your salvation; trust that God is with you, close to you, there to save and strengthen you! Trust that promise, and give thanks to the Lord!

For some of us, this pandemic has felt a bit like exile as the virus has stolen from us the lives and lifestyles to which we were accustomed or hoping to become accustomed – lives without masks or viral surges or booster vaccines or concerns about positivity rates and omicron variants. We have had to learn a whole new language around this virus and to consciously think about how to be safe and keep safe those we love around the holidays and beyond. To all of you who live in that exiled land of COVID, hear these words of the prophet Isaiah:

*Surely God is your salvation! Trust God and do not be afraid!*

*Give thanks to the Lord, call on God’s name!*

*For great in your midst is the Holy One, your God!*

The Lord is greater than this virus and will guide us through this pandemic. That is not to say, as some bad theologians have suggested, that we need not take precautions or get the vaccine because Jesus will save us. God is at work through scientists creating the vaccines, through doctors and nurses caring for patients and administering vaccines, and through each of us in making wise decisions about how to safely navigate these viral waters. Our God is sovereign over all the earth and works not only in Christian lives, but through the hands and minds of any men and women whom God chooses to become instruments of God’s healing, saving hand.

Their talents are gifts of God shared with us, and we give thanks for them this Advent season. The very opportunity to gather together in ways that we could not just a year ago when vaccines were just becoming available is another reason to give thanks. As we heard repeatedly in our long-range planning sessions, the livestreaming of our worship has been a blessing to many of you for which to give thanks. The blessings continue, in COVID and out of COVID, and we who have been so blessed have the opportunity to offer our thanks to God in our prayers; each time we fail to do so is a missed opportunity!

Our Scottish friend Jim Simpson recalls a story told by Fiona Dalton. One Christmas she sent a Christmas pudding (what we might call a fruitcake) to some French friends. She placed the traditional decorative sprig of holly on top of the pudding before wrapping up the parcel and sending it off. A few weeks later she received a note of gratitude from her friends: “*Thank you so much for the plant. We watered it every day, but unfortunately it died*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Sometimes it is the thought that counts, and I suspect that is true for us with God as well. We don’t always get the words exactly right, but God knows our thoughts and hearts, and is pleased to hear our prayers of thanks anyway.

Such gratitude nurtures within us the promise of peace, suggests Paul. It is peace which, like some of my sermons, surpasses all understanding, peace which soothes troubled hearts and minds, peace which is rooted in the coming of the child who is the Prince of Peace. In her book *Grateful*, Diana Butler Bass observes:

*Social scientists have extolled gratitude as a personal path to peace, health, and contentment. Giving thanks, however, is more than a private practice; those same researchers insist that gratitude is socially beneficial and strengthens communities. Gratitude is about ‘me,’ and it is about ‘we.*’[[2]](#endnote-2)

Gratitude is, in short, more than thanks for the blessings we enjoy personally from the hand of God. It is also intrinsic to our public life where we have so much for which to be thankful. So, while we express our thanks to God for our individual blessings, we also offer our thanks to God for one another and offer thanks to one another – as my sister does so well – for those blessings we receive from each other. That practice of gratitude, really an ethic of gratitude, a way of thankful living, may just nurture God’s peace within our public life as well as our private lives, and that is something we sorely need!

This Advent season, as you race to finish your shopping and baking and decorating, take some time each day to give thanks to God for the blessings you enjoy. Take time each night as you lay your head on the pillow to count five things that have happened that day for which you are grateful to God, for that too is prayer. And if Paul is right, then that simple practice may nurture peace in your heart and a better night’s sleep. As Bing Crosby sings in *White Christmas*:

*If you’re worried and you can’t sleep,*

*just count your blessings instead of sheep,*

*and you’ll fall asleep counting your blessings.*

May the God who blesses us all, bless you with Christmas joy, sweet dreams, and heavenly peace. Amen

1. James A. Simpson*, All About Christmas*, Gprdon Wright Publishing:1994, p.67 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, HarperOne:2018, p.xvii [↑](#endnote-ref-2)