

Kent A. Webber
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“REASONS TO GIVE THANKS”

Psalm 147

Thanksgiving is embedded in both the Old and New Testament Scriptures as an important virtue for one who believes in the Triune God. Later this month is Thanksgiving, first set in place by President Abraham Lincoln as an annual national holiday. He made that proclamation on October 3, 1863, during the middle of the Civil War. The year before Lincoln and his wife had endured a personal tragedy, the death of their beloved son Willie. Three months before Lincoln’s Thanksgiving proclamation, the bloody slaughter known as the Battle of Gettysburg had been fought. One hundred sixty-five thousand soldiers fought in that critical three-day battle, which left 50,000 dead, wounded or missing. Yet in the midst of that pain and sorrow, and uncertainty about the outcome of the Civil War, Lincoln took time to proclaim a national day of Thanksgiving to thank God for His many blessings! Some journalists called it a cynical act and asked, “What do we have to be thankful for?”

In the midst of grief and struggle, some of you may feel that way today. What do we have to be thankful for this year? The psalmist tackles that question in Psalm 147 and provides a whole laundry list of reasons why God is worthy of our thanksgiving.

The psalmist gives thanks that God builds up Jerusalem, regathers the exiles, heals the broken, commands creation, lifts up the humble, and humbles the proud. God provides for the earth and feeds the animals. The Lord protects Jerusalem, blesses her children, granting her peace and bounty. The Creator commands nature by his Word and reveals Himself to God's covenant people through the law.

The Psalm falls into three major sections (1-6, 7-11, 12-20, each of which begins with an admonition to praise or thank God. (read Psalm 147; pg. 582 OT in pew Bibles)

When we gather material from all three sections there are a variety of different reasons why the psalmist is grateful to God. I want to focus on just three. One is God's care for creation.

Verse 4 says, "The Lord determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names." Rather than worshipping stars

as deities themselves, the psalmist views God as the sovereign Creator who brought the stars into being and commands them. So even at that time the Hebrew people acknowledged Yahweh not as a local deity who ruled over a limited area, but as Lord of heaven and earth, the Creator and Sustainer of all things!

The psalmist focuses on God's care for the animal kingdom and birds in verse 9. Some Christians wonder whether their beloved pets will be in God's eternal kingdom. Without being absolutely certain, I think passages such as this one with an emphasis on God's care for all creatures, is an encouraging word on that subject. My dad had a dog, a Golden Retriever named Duke. He was an enthusiastic retriever for my duck-hunting dad and a loving pet at the same time! He had a habit of enthusiastically greeting people who came to visit. He'd wiggle all over, more like a worm than a dog, with his back side moving in one direction and his front side in the other. And he wagged his head furiously and lifted his muzzle so he could show his teeth in a huge dog-smile! I've never seen another dog replicate that exactly! When my dad died I was struck by how depressed

Duke became. He well knew that his master was gone and deeply missed him! So in God's eternal kingdom perhaps Duke will make an appearance with those who loved him!

In vs. 8 and later in vs. 15-18 the writer focuses on God's Lordship over the weather, another aspect of God's care for creation. Yahweh is the giver of rain and fertility, not Baal or some other Canaanite fertility god or goddess! God's power is made manifest in Winter snow and wind and hail as well as in the Spring snow-melt, making waters flow, a welcome image for us this year in the midst of a serious drought!

Too often, living in Marin we may take for granted the beauty of the creation which surrounds us. A couple weeks ago a friend and I ran to the top of Mt. Burdell. Though I had done it before, I felt like I was on top of the world looking down on Novato! In the sunshine, even though the hills were golden brown rather than green, it was a beautiful sight!

I think this emphasis on God's care for creation reinforces our role as stewards of the environment, with the task of wisely

managing the many natural resources around us so, that future generations will also be able to enjoy God's beautiful creation!

A second reason to give thanks is our Creator's care for God's faith-filled covenant people! This psalm was probably written in part to celebrate the completion of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem city walls under Nehemiah, or perhaps earlier when the Jewish captives in Babylon were allowed by Cyrus the Persian to return home to Jerusalem. When the "brokenhearted" and "wounded" and "downtrodden" are mentioned, it's likely the former Jewish captives are in focus.

Verses 10 and 11 continue this theme of God's care for those who trust him. "God's delight is not in the strength of the horse (thought of as a warhorse more than as an agricultural beast of burden), nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner (soldiers in battle); but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear (reverence) him, in those who hope in his steadfast love." Rather than being impressed by the implements of war, God values those who trust him and hope in his grace. In other words, what God wants most from us is our faith, our trust!

A third reason to give thanks to God is mentioned at the end of our passage in verses 19- 20, involving God's self-revelation. “God declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances.” The word of the Lord takes different forms and has different functions. The psalmist speaks of the Word of God as an agent of God's rule set to do his bidding (verses 15 and 18). The Word is an active force by which the Lord deals with the world. In verse 19 “word” is the summary concept of God's law, which revealed God's will. It was a gift of guidance that set the Hebrews apart from all others. What marks the people of God is the gift of God's Word. For Christians, Jesus as God's eternal Word made flesh for us is God's most complete self-revelation, the One to whom the Scriptures bear unique and authoritative witness. So for Christians the Word is the personified agent of God, Jesus Christ, for whom we should all be most grateful!

This past week Lisa showed me a wonderful book entitled, **Living Life as a Thank You.** Here is just one of the thanksgiving

vignettes, “Mary Beth’s Story.” It shows how gratitude leads to compassion. “It happened on the commuter train. I was in the middle of a very difficult time. I had never felt so alone and afraid in my life. I rested my head against the window, wiping away the tears and hoping no one saw me. Suddenly, someone tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a hand-drawn note. Scrawled in pen were a rainbow and a sun and the words: “I see you there crying. Know that the sun will come out again, and that you are never alone. You do not know me, but I will pray for you.”

I saw only the well-manicured hand of a woman. But I never even saw the woman’s face. She disappeared almost instantly. But I knew, in that moment, that no matter what happened to me or my children again, we would never be alone. I had witnessed firsthand the power of one person’s prayer for another at work – big time. I had seen the power of the kindness of strangers in our lives. And I believed in that moment that I had met an angel. I would be forever grateful. From that day forward, I became consciously aware of, and grateful for, the

power of strangers in our lives. Call them angels or compassionate beings, I do believe they demonstrate the power of the Divine in our lives. . . What I have learned from this is that even our simplest actions – smiling to a stranger walking past us on the street, holding the door for someone at the bookstore, or extending a hand to help an elderly person step down a flight of stairs – make a huge difference. When we reach out with gratitude and kindness, remembering the kindnesses bestowed us, well, there are no words to describe how good we feel. And how we know we are never alone” (pg.67,68; Lesowitz, Nina and Sammons, Mary Beth; c.2009; San Francisco; Viva Editions).

This morning we celebrate the Sacrament of the Eucharist. The word “eucharist” which comes from the Greek NT verb “to give thanks.” Thanksgiving was such a key ingredient in Jesus’ prayer life that at table with his disciples on the last evening of his life, with death staring Jesus in the face, he paused to give thanks to God for God’s many blessings. Though he faced imminent arrest, torture, a sham trial, and execution by

crucifixion, Jesus took time to give thanks, and so should we in all circumstances.

So I encourage you to make a time of thanksgiving a regular ingredient in your daily prayers. When you give thanks you are continuing a tradition which goes back at least 3 millennia to the Psalms, and more recently to Jesus himself! Yes, for a variety of reasons, including God's care for creation, God's care for each of us as people of faith, and God's self-revelation, God is indeed worthy of our thanks and praise!

Let us pray: Generous God, give us a daily awareness of all the good gifts You shower upon us – especially the give of Yourself in the humble incarnation, selfless ministry, vicarious suffering and death, and triumphant resurrection and ascension of Your unique Son Jesus Christ, so that we will always be thanking You. Through Christ the Lord. Amen.