

Words for an Emerging Church

Thursday, November 25, 2021 - Thanksgiving Day

Thanksgiving Meets COVID Inertia

These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. —Psalm 42:4-5

So how thankful are you feeling this year? We can all give at least half a sigh of relief and remind ourselves that it is not as bad as last year. Thanksgiving 2020 was the one where many extended families decided to stay extended and did not gather for fear of spreading the virus. With so many families either refraining from the normal celebrations, or significantly curtailing them, it felt like more of a non-Thanksgiving. This year is different, but more in a matter of degree than a real change. Many are still being very cautious in their social exposures and are either not gathering as might be traditional or are keeping their get-togethers much smaller. And even when families are casting aside earlier restrictions on social contacts, there is still that pall of anxiety that looms overhead, for most of us as we are painfully aware of the virus's persistence. We may try to cheer ourselves with the assertion that the worst of COVID is behind us, but the question remains: When are we going to really get back to Thanksgiving, or back to normal life?

The walk of faith is often a troubled path, and the psalmist is a great source of wisdom for us as we navigate those troubles. He understood the experience of non-Thanksgiving as in the 42nd psalm he spoke of tears, a downcast soul and longing for God. These things happen and God understands. Are you filled with sadness on this day? Pour out that sadness to God and know that you are understood and loved. The psalmist with his usual candor made his feelings clear, but that was not the end of the story. He had a plan for getting back on track and his next Thanksgiving was going to be a real Thanksgiving!

The plan was in two parts and began with vivid remembrances of joyous times in the past. He exulted in having led the throng of worshippers to the Temple in earlier days and recalled the pure delight he knew in that joyful parade. Having looked back, he then looked forward and assured himself that he would again know joyful praise. *Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.* To summarize, he

remembered joyful times past and assured himself that those joys would return. Happy days *will* be here again.

While this seems to accurately summarize the psalmist's strategy, there is, however, a crucial point of clarification which demands attention. When he declared, *for I will yet praise him*, might he have meant to say that he *hoped* in better times to come? That sounds a bit weak for one as determined as the psalmist. Let's take it up a notch. Did he mean that he was *expecting* to return to a place of joy, but was not making any guarantees? This seems to be a move in the right direction but is still a sad under-estimation of the psalmist. Knowing the psalmist as we do it seems obvious that he was *forcefully claiming* that joy. It was going to happen, or he was going to die trying! He was going to grab for that joy and claim it as his own.

But can one really do that? According to our normal sense of things we cannot make ourselves joyful, but the psalmist would strenuously object to such thinking. He would be shocked to know that we commonly see thanksgiving as the *result* of a joyful heart, and when our hearts are not joyful, thanksgiving is a nonstarter. But according to the psalmist, thanksgiving begins with a wholehearted effort of giving praise and being about the work of worship. Joy follows. He would insist that thanksgiving is not to be seen as a matter of how we are feeling at the moment, but as our decision to thank God in the anticipation of our receiving grateful hearts. Decide to be thankful, he would urge, then go for it!

The COVID pandemic has caused a cloud of depression to settle over our land and over each and every one of our lives. The inertia which it has brought to many of us is palpable. I suppose the psalmist would shout a loud amen to the counsel I heard many years ago from a therapist who had dealt with many depressed people. His precious insight was simple: When feeling slowed or sidelined by depression, stop and ask yourself, "If I wasn't depressed right now, what would I be doing?" Then get up and do it anyway.

However we may be feeling, let us be about the work of Thanksgiving, *for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

Have a Blessed Thanksgiving,

Pastor Jim

O God our Father, we would thank thee for all the bright things of life. Help us to see them, and to count them, and to remember them, that our lives may flow in ceaseless praise; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

—John Henry Jowett, 1846-1923