

Prayers of and for Gratitude

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost – November 16, 2003

Scripture Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Psalm 100

¹Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

²Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

³Know that the LORD is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵For the LORD is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Colossians 1:9-12

⁹For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Today, we look at how we might keep, at all times, a spirit of thankfulness toward God.

A prayer of gratitude!

Giving thanks and giving praise are nearly synonymous. The brevity, clarity, and simple beauty of Psalm 100 have long placed it at the center of Christian worship. In just a few phrases, this psalm lifts up to God our prayers of praise and of gratitude. And it does so by confronting much that we hold dear, leading us toward a path very different from the path that our culture wants us to take.

Psalm 100 is so brief that we can take the time to look closely at its structure. The psalm begins with an invitation to all the earth: make a joyful noise, worship God, come before him with joy, singing all the while! True praise, true worship, and true thanksgiving are always offered with understanding and knowledge; we must know why and who we praise. Otherwise, our thanksgiving is nothing more

Bible Sunday in the UMC

Today marks Bible Sunday, the beginning of Bible Week in the UMC. It is a time when we can reflect upon the place of the Bible in our church and in our lives.

Following the lead of its founder, John Wesley, the UMC proclaims: "We believe that the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvations. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice."¹

Regrettably, for much of the last half of the 20th century, the Bible was little used and little taught in many UMC congregations. However, in the late 80's, this began to change as clergy and lay leadership called for the UMC to once again embrace God's Word so that "we may come to know the truth of the biblical message in its bearing on our own lives and the life of the world."¹

Several years ago, we recommitted our church to the biblical faith. The St. Andrew Bible Academy was created and began to offer a variety of classes aimed at helping us all to better understand, appreciate, and apply Scripture. This fall, over 270 adults enrolled in 8-week long mid-week Bible Academy classes!! This was a potent demonstration of God's empowering Spirit at work. Bible Academy classes will resume in January. There will be a variety of classes offered: large, lecture-oriented classes and smaller discussion-oriented classes; daytime and evening; books of the Bible will be studied as well as books about the Bible. Please prayerfully consider enrolling in a class. A deeper understanding of the Bible will enrich and strengthen your faith, for it is "through Scripture [that] the living Christ meets us in the experience of redeeming grace."¹

1. These quotes are from *The Book of Discipline of the UMC – 2000*, which contains the governing documents of the United Methodist Church.

than sentiment. Or even worse, we could thank the wrong person. The Israelites were known to thank a false god for what had YHWH had given them (Hosea 2:8). I wonder if we ever thank a false “god” for what the Lord God has provided us?

Because we can get this thanksgiving stuff so wrong the psalmist instructs us in v. 3. We are to worship God, the one true God, because it is God who made us. We are his; we belong to him. We are his people; we are his sheep. There may be times in my life when I am tempted to scream out, “It’s my life! Now leave me alone.” But I would be wrong. My life is not my own; it belongs to God. As v. 3 could be translated - “It is he who made us, and not we ourselves.” God is the creator and sustainer of all life, all that we value and cherish in ourselves and in others. Thus, it is only right that we would enter God’s gates with songs of praise and thanksgiving, blessing God’s very name. It is God who is good. It is his love that endures forever. It is God who is steadfastly faithful to us all. In these five short verses, the psalmist points us toward a life centered around praise and thanksgiving - directed toward God!

The Letter to the Colossians

Colossae was located about 110 miles east of Ephesus on a major east-west highway cutting across southern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Though once the most important city in its region, by Paul’s day Colossae had been overshadowed by Laodicea (see Revelation 3:14-22) and Hierapolis. In the early 60’s AD, the region was struck by a major earthquake and Colossae never really recovered.

Because letters like this one can only reflect one side of the conversation, disputes rage regarding what Paul is responding to in his letter. But regardless of the exact nature of the problems, Paul points the reader directly to Jesus Christ. In this letter, Paul dwells more upon Jesus Christ - his divinity and his creative and redemptive work - than in any other of Paul’s letters. For example, the paragraph immediately following today’s scripture passage is one of Paul’s classic statements about the nature and work of Jesus Christ (1:15-20)

You may wonder why I include what seems to be historical trivia in these studies - like Colossae’s earthquake. I do so because many of us have little idea that some NT “books,” like Colossians, are real letters written to real people in real places to deal with specific and troubling problems. It is my hope that a few details will help make all this “Bible stuff” seem a little more real to you!

A prayer for gratitude!

In the course of his missionary journeys, Paul was usually a disturber of the peace and was often imprisoned for it. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are all letters that Paul wrote from prison. When Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Colossae, we can be sure that he would much rather have been with them. Instead, Paul must be content with writing to them and, more importantly, praying for them. His opening prayer is our New Testament passage today.

Paul prays that the Colossians will grow in knowledge and wisdom so that they will delight God with their good works and the fruit of their faith in Christ, such as joy, gentleness, peace, and patience. By maturing as Christians, they will be stronger and able to endure patiently whatever is thrown at them. But most importantly, Paul prays that the Colossians will lead lives of joyful gratitude, giving thanks to the Father for the gift of their inheritance, the gift of God’s grace that has enabled them to be adopted as children of God. (see Galatians 4:1-7 for more on this)

Paul will go on to talk about this spirit of thanksgiving over and over in his letter. This is no generic spirit of gratitude. Rather, Paul prays that the Christians in Colossae will always remember that God rescued them, just as he rescued the Hebrews from Egypt long before. For once again, in this new exodus, God has redeemed his people and led them into the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Once again and for all time, their sins have been forgiven.

A spirit of gratitude

In all this, we learn that a true spirit of gratitude is far more than saying grace before meals or even gathering with our families on one Thursday each year. It is living a life centered upon God, always praising and thanking him for the blessings, great and small, which he has given us. It is God who redeems us and rescues us from lives of isolation and loneliness. Such a spirit of gratitude does not come naturally to us. We must work for it and pray for it!

Daily Bible Readings

(outline of Colossians taken from Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson: *Introducing the NT*)
Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Colossians 1:1-20 Paul's prayer and his hymn of Christ	Day 2 Colossians 1:21-2:7 Our new relationship with God brought about by Christ's reconciliation of all reality
Day 3 Colossians 3:1-17 Ethical implications of God's activity in Christ	Day 4 Colossians 3:18-4:6 Ethical implications, part 2
Day 5 Colossians 4:7-18 The letter's closing	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

Want to learn more about the Bible and what it means for you?

Scott Engle's new Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is open to all adults. We meet in Wesley Hall (the 'old' sanctuary) at 9:30. It is a great chance to make new friends and learn more about the Bible and the Christian faith. More than 150 people have joined the class! The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions, answers, and fellowship.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Walter Brueggemann suggests that modern TV commercials are structured like the ancient prayers of the Israelites! Both begin with statements about problems that are faced (threats from the Assyrians or hair loss!) and both conclude with promises of well-being (enemies gone or hair restored!). In between, there is some transforming agent. For the Israelites, this was God – or at least when they got it right! Too often, Brueggemann says, we turn to the false gods of new products or services that we hope will solve our problems and transform our lives – failing to see that true and lasting transformation comes from God. Do you agree with Brueggemann's comparison? What other sorts of false gods do we embrace, rather than offering thanks and praise to God?
2. How hard it is for us to hear God's message that our lives are not our own, but, rather, belong to him. We are not self-made men and women; we are made by God. In the 19th Century, William Henley wrote, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." These words resonate within the hearts of many Americans, but they are not pleasing to God. In contrast to Henley, Clinton McCann writes, "Genuine life is lived in submission to God." Discuss the quotes from Henley and McCann. Which do you find more appealing? Which best states your own desires and emotions? How might thanksgivings offered up by Henley and McCann differ? Here's a hint. In the same poem, "Invictus," Henley wrote, "I thank whatever gods may be, for my unconquerable soul."