

“GIVING THANKS EVEN IN 2020.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

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Text for the Sermon: Psalm 148; I Thessalonians 5:16-18

Introduction.

This has been a challenging year for all of us and for me as a pastor. I have been pushed to the limits. But I want to be clear about something. I have not ceased to give thanks to God for you. I love you and I thank God for you and for the privilege of being your pastor.

How do you give thanks in a year like 2020? 2020 will go down in the history books as one of the worst years ever, not the worst, there are several contenders for that title, but certainly one of the worst, and perhaps the worst in most of our life-times, with the possible exception of those of you who endured the Nazi occupation of Holland.

But back to my question, how do we give thanks for a year like 2020? Maybe we shouldn't. Maybe we should write-off 2020 like a bad investment and try to forget about it. Maybe we should just look forward to 2021.

How do you give thanks in the midst of disappointments, heartaches, fears, losses, health challenges, loss of loved ones, discouragements of all kinds for all the things we couldn't do.

How we give thanks for 2020 will depend on our theology, on what we believe about God, on how we understand the sovereignty and providence of God.

Romans 8:28 gives one answer to the question of how to give thanks in 2020.

Romans 8:28 We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

In God's creation nothing is ever wasted, nothing is ever lost. No experiences are ever wasted. Everything and by that I mean everything, is purposeful, meaningful, useful, or to use a spiritual word, sanctifying. God is at work in all things for His glory and for our eternal benefit.

Think about the adjectives you would use to describe 2020. Hard, by all means, but not wasted. Difficult, to be sure, but not purposeless or meaningless.

God never wastes a pain, a hurt, a waiting, a disappointment. God never wastes a crisis and He is not wasting this pandemic and all the economic chaos.

God is still on Plan A and it is going along right on track and right on schedule. God doesn't have a plan B, He never has had one. He doesn't need one, He is God.

1 Thessalonians 5 gives us another answer for how to give thanks even in 2020.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

How can we rejoice always? By staying in constant communication with God all through the day, the God who is working His good plan. And what happens when we are in constant prayer? We get a different perspective, His perspective for which we can then give thanks to God, for big things and small things, and in all kinds of circumstances.

Our circumstances don't dictate our state of thankfulness, God does. Our attitude of thanksgiving overcomes our circumstances. And this is God's will for us, to give Him glory by saying thank you for all His good gifts even when our circumstances don't seem to justify thanksgiving.

So how do we apply this to Covid-19? Is there such a thing as a Covid silver lining?

The vast majority recover and it mostly spares children. We have huge resources in our county, huge supply chains, ready availability of most things, many of which are lacking in many other parts of the world. We have incredible medical services and the heroic efforts of those in the medical community. Progress is being made on a vaccine.

We have benefited from financial resources. We have technology resources which enable us to stay connected.

We have seen people become more aware of the needs of others. Countless people have stepped up to. People are being creative and resourceful, doing things in ways never done before.

Some people have made lifestyle changes, some have changed habits. This pandemic has exposed some of our idols, some of the things we have been trusting in beside God.

Such as trusting money and financial security, trusting government and leaders to save us, trusting in the comforts of our culture and all the props that have been ripped out, presuming on God's favor and blessing on us and our nation.

This is God's reset for us spiritually to rethink our priorities, our misplaced objects of trust, our purpose here on earth. People are turning to God, to Scripture, to prayer.

And this is only a beginning. What does the Spirit bring to your mind that you can give thanks for in 2020?

Psalm 148

Psalm 148 is a sweeping psalm of praise and thanksgiving. It calls on all creatures great and small and even all creation animate and inanimate to render to God His due, to acknowledge God as the creator and sustainer and giver of all things.

What do you make of this, the psalmists asking brute creatures and nonliving elements to praise God? Praise Him sun, moon and stars. Praise Him sea creatures, rain and wind, hills and trees and cows.

Really, what is he saying? He is saying that there is absolutely no part of the universe and our earth that does not own its existence to God and owe Him praise and thanks.

All are called upon, from kings and princes to men and women, children, young and old. And most especially the people of Israel, the people of God, the people near to God to whom God has revealed Himself in His Son and our Savior.

From those nearest to God is expected the most. We most of all are called to lift our voices and join the chorus of the universe in one great symphony and song of praise and thanks. This song is heard in the highest heavens and in the deepest deeps and everywhere in between.

Not only is everything to give praise and thanks to God, but we also are to give praise and thanks to God for everything.

Now what kind of thanksgiving do you think more honors God? A big blanket prayer of thanks, like “Dear God, thanks for everything. Amen.” Or an itemized list that shows we have given our reasons for thanks some real thought, like David prayed.

“Dear God, I praise you and thank you for the sun, moon and stars, sea creatures, insects and birds, fire, hail, wind and snow, fruit trees, cows, flowers,

Psalm 148 teaches us how to fulfill God’s will for us by giving thanks in all things and how to be specific. Psalm 148 encourages us to make lists of things great and small, like suns and insects.

What do we have we have not received? We have nothing that has not been given us from heaven. It is a sign of humility and maturity to give thanks, to say thank you, for all we have received. Let there be no blanket prayers this Thanksgiving.

Make a list. Make it a competition, out do one another in giving thanks. Get specific. Don’t stop until you get to one hundred. Kids you can do this.

Modern conveniences not around even just a hundred years ago, and lacking for many.
Light, heat, electricity, in door plumbing and in door dining. Clean water
Hot showers, good water pressure
Computers, spellchecker, email attachments, on line shopping, phones with cameras
Discovering a good life hack, duct tape, WD-40, Carhartts
Medicine, pain relievers, antibiotics and probiotics

Five senses, four seasons.

Goldfish, both kinds, in the pond and in the cupboard
Popcorn, pizza; chocolate, a God who created chocolate. Ice cubes and ice cream.

Sitting down to a family dinner
Hiking, Mt. Baker, Birch Bay
Small towns and the many blessings and benefits we enjoy as citizens of this nation.

Paychecks, stimulus checks, a job, days off
For working from home, learning from home; for live streaming and Zoom and Go to Meeting.
Teachers, schools, online and in person, books, being able to read.
For pet dogs and cats, and whatever other creatures mom and dad allow in the house.
Christmas Tulip lights on Front Street
Driving on the Guide through Bellingham and hitting all green lights.

And don't forget to be thankful for very mundane and ordinary things.

The story is told of John Witherspoon, the only pastor to sign the Declaration of Independence and president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton). He lived in Rock Hill about two miles from the campus and drove a horse and buggy to his office at the college every day.

One day one of his neighbors burst into his office exclaiming, 'Dr. Witherspoon, you must join me in giving thanks to God for His extraordinary providence in saving my life, for as I was driving from Rocky Hill, the horse ran away and the buggy was smashed to pieces on the rocks, but I escaped unharmed!' Witherspoon replied, 'Why, I can tell you a far more remarkable providence than that. I have driven over that road hundreds of times. My horse never ran away, my buggy never was smashed, I was never hurt.'

We can easily overlook the remarkable providences of God in this constant kindness, blessing and provision, for every breath, every meal, every day we wake up. He is not just in the manna that falls from heaven, but in the food that grows in the garden or awaits us at the grocery store.

How many of us drove to church this morning and thanked God for a safe arrival? How many hundreds of times have we driven to church without incident and without thought of thanks?

Don't miss the extraordinary in God's ordinary providence.

My prayer is that God will multiple His blessings on all of you, abounding grace.

So now, to all of you I say, go to your homes, gather with friends and family, be filled with good food and more filled with thanksgiving. Let's fill this day and week with outburst of thanks to God, thanks for life and health and strength, thanks for your spouse, parents, children, relationships, employment, provision, church and most of all, above all else, for Jesus and our forgiveness and salvation for the Gospel of His great grace. For the Holy Spirit and the Word of God and His church and eternal life. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.