



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

November 22, 2020

Be Thankful
Rev. Louise Rogers

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: December 1, 2020

Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9,12

Philippians 4:4-7

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple towards the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside to the outer gate that faces towards the east; and the water was coming out on the south side. He said to me, 'This water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.'

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

What do you think is the biggest river in the world? The Mississippi, Amazon or Nile. Around Pittsburgh we are proud of our three rivers, but they are not the biggest by far. Christian writer, Max Lucado, claims the widest river on earth is none of these. He says the largest river is an imaginary body of water called “If Only”. People stand on its banks and cast longing eyes over the waters. We long to cross but can’t seem to find the ferry. We are easily convinced the If Only River separates us from the good life. “If only I were thinner, I’d have the good life. If only I were richer, I’d have the good life. If only the kids would come home for a visit. If only the kids were gone. If only I could leave home and get married If only my calendar was free of all these Zoom calls, then I would have the good life! You can fill in your own dilemma. The If Only River Max says, is the biggest river on earth.

This week of Thanksgiving, where are you standing? Many of us we are on the banks of the If Only River. If only I could gather with my whole family, if only this virus would disappear and I could throw away these annoying masks, if only I could go shopping on Black Friday in peace, then I could have the good life. Anxiety abounds for good reasons. We are living in a pandemic with economic uncertainty, wrestling with justice issues, followed by national division over the election. We cry out, “when will we get back to normal, the good life? Here at church we ask, God, are you paying attention?”

Enter the Apostle Paul as one who knows a thing or two about struggles in his life. As an Apostle and servant for Jesus, he teaches about the good life. Although he traveled around the Mediterranean region establishing

Christian churches and encouraging people on how to become disciples of Jesus, he experienced severe personal hardship. In one of his letters Paul provides his short list of sufferings; he was shipwrecked and left in the open waters a day and a night, beaten and left for dead more than once, lost privilege and status professionally, lost his wealth, and as he writes the words we read today he is in prison with a Roman guard at his door. Paul does not dwell on the sacrifices he has made for the gospel. Rather, he teaches that the good life begins, not when circumstances change, but when our attitude toward them does.

We are ultimately blessed in having the love of Jesus Christ in our life. This brings us hope! Christ's love gives us victory in our daily living. The Apostle Paul wades into our waters and gives an antidote for anxiety. *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus”* (Phil. 4:6). Paul embedded two essential words into the verse that deserve special attention: **with thanksgiving**. Sprinkled among the phrases of: “Help me...”, “Please give me...”, “Won’t you show me...?” are two wonderful words, Thank you.

From the time we are young we are taught to say thank you, gratitude doesn’t seem to come naturally. Creating a thankful attitude changes our outlook, scripture is supported by science. Grateful feelings release health-producing neurochemicals into our body: dopamine, and endorphins. These help us feel good. That in itself is a cause for thanksgiving!

And more: Thankfulness protects our bodies and minds from the harmful chemicals released by anxiety, anger, and fear. In other words, the direction is to be generous in giving thanks, not just at special celebrations, but every day. It's about adopting a lifestyle of thanksgiving, for our own good. *:"always giving thanks to God the Father for everything ..." (Eph.5:20)*

Back during the dark days of 1929, a group of ministers in the Northeast, all graduates of the Boston School of Theology, gathered to discuss how they should conduct their Thanksgiving Sunday services. Things were about as bad as they could get, with no sign of relief. The bread lines were depressingly long, the stock market had plummeted, and the term Great Depression seemed an apt description for the mood of the country. The ministers thought they should only lightly touch upon the subject of Thanksgiving in deference to the human misery all about them. After all, what was there to be thankful for?

But it was Dr. William L. Stiger, pastor of a large congregation in the city that rallied the group. This was not the time, he suggested, to give mere passing mention to Thanksgiving, just the opposite. This was the time for the nation to get matters in perspective and thank God for blessings always present, but perhaps suppressed due to intense hardship. The ministers came up with a key truth. The most intense moments of thankfulness are not found in times of plenty, but when difficulties abound. Think of the Pilgrims on that first Thanksgiving 400 years ago. Half their number dead, folks without a country, but still there was thanksgiving to God.

Their gratitude was not for something but in something.

It was that same sense of gratitude that lead Abraham Lincoln to formally establish the first Thanksgiving Day in the midst of national civil war, when the list of casualties seemed to have no end and the very nation struggled for survival. Perhaps in your own life, right now, there is intense hardship. You are experiencing your own personal Great Depression. Why should you be thankful this day? Because God's steadfast love is for us today.

Ezekiel takes us to the banks of another river, the river flowing from God's temple toward the sea. This river is a river teeming with God's grace and life. All that was stagnant will become fresh and alive when God's river of grace arrives. Trees will bear fruit and bring food for all. God's Grace River is with us now transforming lives, bringing love and goodness, and strength for the journey we face. How can we dive into the river? Start by counting our blessings, Do you see any friends or family? Do you see any grace from God? Love of God? Do you see any gifts? Abilities or talents? Any provisions from God?

As you look at your blessings thank God each day. A solid life habit is to note three things every day to lift up with thanks. Discovering thanks will change our outlook, moving us closer to God.

Paul shows us the way to build a life of faith in times of struggles and during times of joy. He says, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who gives me strength.” (Phil. 4:11-13)
Jesus is with us not bringing us strength for our daily living too, for that we can all be thankful. Amen.



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