

Colossians 1:9-20 Redemption
November 24, 2019

It is the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and this week all over America people will gather to share a feast and celebrate the blessings of life. There is much to be thankful about. I will let you make your own list but mention just a few things.

One thing to say is that it is good to be alive, to be healthy and strong enough to experience life's wonders, and to be blessed with some means to enjoy them with. We are thankful for the beauty of nature, and the sustenance of food and shelter and the other of life's necessities. We are thankful for meaningful work, family and friends. Without such things we would struggle to conclude that it is good to be alive.

We are thankful for the larger communities of which we are a part. We know that in some places, for some people, there is a threat of war or violence, more than what we have known, where the communities are in greater disarray, and the systems that provide life's necessities have broken down and there is suffering. I think it is safe to say that we are cared for, and must recognize that care with gratitude.

And let me suggest one more thing about gratitude in general. It is an attitude of life that is uplifting, and one that does not necessarily have to be nurtured. Life has hardships and when we focus on them it affects our general mood, self-pity drags us down even when it is justified. We have choices about these attitudes.

Given the choice to stew over life's hardships and complain, or reflect on life's blessings and give thanks, *it is better to give thanks*, not just once per year, but daily, all throughout the year. I hope you all have a wonderful Thanksgiving.

The Cosmic Threat

Our text this morning comes from Colossians, and in it Paul contrasts the kingdom of light with the dominion of darkness, which takes the question of gratitude to a different place. One might simplify things by saying that we are also thankful for salvation, with which I am sure everyone would agree. But, if I may, let me suggest that we look at things a little deeper.

One of the intellectual or ideological components of biblical thought is known as apocalypticism. Part of what that means is the belief in a cosmic struggle between good and evil, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. This idea is not far from the popular mind. We see it acted out in stories like Star Wars and the Lord of the Rings and most of the fantasy superhero sagas. That struggle is what Paul is referring to in this text.

The struggle is experienced individually. In Romans chapter 7 Paul writes very passionately about how he struggles to do the good he wants to do, and avoid doing the evil he does not want. All of us know this internal war.

We are at war within between the desire to love and the tendency to hate; between the realization that we must be concerned with the meeting of our own basic needs, and the necessary concern for others; the temptation to be self-ish, between the acknowledgment of great threat to our own being all around and the fear that arises from it, and the desire for inner, and well as outer, peace. The temptation is to become angry and selfish and afraid, while we desire joy and love and peace.

This struggle is also seen on the larger scale of our communal life, whether in small groups like our families, or larger ones like the country or the whole human family. And we see trouble all around. Of course, one can't be awake and miss the unrest and dissatisfaction in our political life. And the more one pays attention, there are to be seen several combustible situations that might burst forth in flames and could be catastrophic.

I would be amiss not to mention the environmental threat. Even if people disagree about it, the threat looms. Not to mention illnesses like cancer and heart disease, depression, various kinds of psychosis, addictions, and others too numerous to name.

If one does not relate well to the idea of a cosmic showdown between the forces of good and evil, we might agree that there is at least a cloud hanging over all of life, and the burden of it is stressful, and no one escapes the burden, even those in denial about it or the ones who just don't want to discuss it.

It is a cloud that casts a shadow over everything, even on the sunniest of days.

Redemption

St. Paul's prayer for the Colossians and for us is that we might be strengthened with all power, have great endurance and patience, and joyfully give thanks . . .

because we have been rescued, redeemed, forgiven. The whole message of the bible, written to people who had been conquered and oppressed is that in this cosmic struggle, a great victory has been won. Even though as we play out the years it sometimes seems there is no victory. There is . . . and we have all been caught up in it.

I am sure that the recipients of Paul's letters, who were by no means the rich and powerful of their times, often felt it was a certain kind of nonsense to speak of such a victory. But that victory was, and still is, the message of the gospel. And there is a great deal of power in believing in it. There is a healing power. There is an encouraging power. There is an understanding power, that allows one to see clearly things as they are. There is strengthening power.

The early believers found this victory and this power in Jesus, and not just in the person of Jesus, in his compassion and kindness, in his love and wisdom, but they found this victory in his death, which was about as low a death as one could die, as a rejected criminal. But it is actually in the death that they saw

the triumph, because they saw the presence of God in it.

“For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile himself to all things, whether things on earth, or in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

So when it comes to gratitude, we are thankful for the victory of the “Kingdom of Light,” too, in addition to all of the other things on the list. And that is worth being thankful for.

A Worthy Life

Because of this triumph, and our faith in it, we are called in this Colossians text to:

Lead lives worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened towards endurance and patience, and joyful thanks.

So when you look upon your life as I do mine, or upon this world, remember this victory, that in Christ it has been already won, lest we become discouraged, lest we allow evil to overcome good in our own souls, and lest we succumb to some apparent defeat to the dominion of darkness in the world that God has saved.

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