

We may look at our world today and conclude that there is not much to give thanks for. There are two major wars being fought and countless minor ones. Oil tankers are being captured and held for ransom. Three major US car companies may be on the verge of going out of business. Boeing says there may be layoffs in 2009. Our economy may be on the edge of a depression. Jobs are being lost. Houses foreclosed on. Mike just told us of expected layoffs in the county. Our shopping malls are become unsafe. And... well you get the picture. What is there to give thanks for in times such as these—Thursday being a day of national thanks giving? We wonder if we have anything to be thankful for. This seems to fit into the theology of Ecclesiastes.

The writer has proclaimed that there is nothing new under the sun. We are born, we live and we die. In the end our sole task is to fear (honor) God. We are to go with God and take our chances. The writer could not imagine a God of grace and love. A God who would give an only Son for others – this was not a part of his vision or understanding of the Almighty. His theology: fear God and hope that in the end you will win with God. This is it. The future is in God's hands—we are to roll the dice with God. I would call this a pessimistic outlook at best. Yet is this not how many see God today? A God who punishes, judges and rebukes. One who says, “follow my rules or else.” If you are good enough, pray enough, give enough, etc. then maybe, just maybe you will earn God's favor.

Christ came and the image of God held by the writer of Ecclesiastes was forever changed. God came and lived in our midst. We begin our Advent celebration next week – a time when we again remember God coming and living in our midst. A God who was born, who lived and who died as one of us—A God who defeated the last barrier, death, by rising to new life on the third day. A God who broke down all barriers and opened access to God for all who would come. We now have access into the area once forbidden. God has come.

This is the message of the Apostle Paul to the Church in Corinth. Those who were once outside have now been invited inside. We who once needed a mediator are now able to come before God. Eugene Peterson translates our New Testament text in the Message:

Every time I think of you—and I think of you often!—I thank God for your lives of free and open access to God, given by Jesus. There is no end to what has happened in you—it's beyond speech, beyond knowledge. The evidence of Christ has been clearly verified in your lives.

Just think—you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale. And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that.

Paul gives us a thanksgiving message in these few lines. The first thing that we need to be thankful for: We have open and free access to God despite the conditions around us. We no longer need a mediator to stand God on our behalf (remember the High Priest was able to enter the Holy of Holies only once a year to mediate on behalf of the sins of the people). The door is open for us to come with boldness before our God. We have this as one of our core Baptist beliefs, the priesthood of all believers. We no longer need someone else to mediate between us and God – we are able to simply come into the very presence of God. We are able to speak freely and openly.

The church was going through some financial hard times. We were meeting to discuss possible ways to continue ministry and keep our balance sheet in the black. One of the members had an idea. He was a fan of a popular television evangelist and he noted that this evangelist offered to pray for people – for a fee. All we needed to do was to make the same offer: if people would send us their money we would pray for them. The entire group responded, “NO!” If people are in need and need prayers we will pray for them, period. We will even help them to pray for themselves but we will not debase God by demanding money for what can be secured for nothing. We have open and free access to our God!

Paul writes, *“There is no end to what has happened in you.”* We have been brought into the family. God continues in us and with us. Each day is a new adventure and each day is one where we are able to communicate with God directly. No words can really compare with God’s great invitation: Come. We all can be adopted into God’s family—adoption is not a bad word in God’s language – we are all adoptees who enter openly and freely into God’s presence.

Then Paul states that we have everything we need. This goes against our popular culture where we want more and more and more. The writer of Ecclesiastes discovered the getting of things does not really satisfy. We always want more. U.S. automakers are in trouble partly because they gave us what we wanted. They tried to satisfy our desire for bigger, more powerful vehicles. We were living in L.A. when Hummers were first introduced and they could not be kept on the lots – there was a waiting list! Our hunger for them could not be satisfied. God in Christ meets our needs. Note though that Paul does not say that Christ meets our wants. God in Christ has provided forgiveness, restoration, hope and redemption. God does supply what we need. It is our wants that gets in the way.

Paul concludes with what may be God’s greatest gift: God never gives up on us. At some point someone called off the search for Steve Fossett and his plane. It was not that they wanted to do it but resources were needed elsewhere and hope was lost of finding him alive. I am sure it was a difficult decision for the officials in charge to make but one that had to be made. Maybe at some time in our life someone has given up on us. Maybe it was a parent, a spouse, an employer, a friend, a co-worker. But for whatever reason they gave up on us.

It is hard for me to fire someone. We had worked with this one person for months. We kept hoping that they would change, do their job. We had mentored, shadowed and done everything we possibly could but they would not change, would not do their job. Finally the board came to the conclusion that we had no other

choice. The job needed to get done and we needed someone who would do it. So, it fell on the lot of the Senior Minister to let this person go. It was not easy. It was giving up on someone, someone we loved and who we wanted to succeed—but for some reason they did not want to. We had hoped they would understand; they didn't.

Maybe, we too, think we have disappointed God once too often. We have sinned and our sin is far beyond God's ability to forgive. We surmise that the last straw has been reached. Paul says no way. Our God never gives up on us – we can give up on God – but God will never, never give up on us. He frames it this way in Romans 8:35-39:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God does not give up on us. God is always ready to receive us home. Like the Prodigal Mother/Father, God stands ready to run to welcome us back – God never gives up on us.

Paul gives us reasons for thanks giving. In the midst of terrible news, world situations, etc. Paul reminds us that God is in all of the circumstances. Paul knew of what he wrote. He knew to live in plenty or want, in sickness or health, in fair seas or rough—would one shipwreck be enough to keep you on shore? Paul writes not some theory but from experience: we have open and free access to God at all times; we have all we need; and our God never gives up on us.

The Message, Eugene Peterson, Navpress, 1993
NIV, Zondervan, 1973 (Romans 8:35-39)