

Surprising Praise

Thanksgiving 2019

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Habakkuk 3:17-19

Acts 16:16-26

I am often surprised at where thanksgiving breaks out. Sometimes you just don't expect it there – that is, there when life has offered you a bad blow. It makes sense to be thankful when all is going well, when everything is going your way, when life offers you what you have always wanted. But what about when you are struggling – with loss, with grief, with failure, with unfulfilled dreams? Can we still celebrate thanksgiving then?

Today I want to be mostly a “story-teller”, telling a series of stories about thanksgiving and praise when you really wouldn't expect it. I take these stories from the Bible, from history, and from personal experience. I probably shouldn't really even call this a sermon. It is more like the ramblings of an old preacher who has already preached too many thanksgiving sermons but still has stories to tell.

1) Habakkuk – Sometime after 598 but before 586 B.C.

Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah. We heard Jeremiah's story of buying the field of Anathoth – symbol of hope – two weeks ago. It is the same, almost hopeless situation that Habakkuk faces. The final assault of the Babylonians is immanent. Exile is looming. Jeremiah buys a plot of land as a symbol of hope for the future. And the prophet Habakkuk? He gets very angry at God – He challenges God. “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you, ‘violence’ and you will not save”.

I am very fascinated by Habakkuk. He could be called the “cynical” prophet, or “the questioning” prophet. Or he could be called “The prophet who disputes with God”. He is always asking the hard, almost unanswerable questions. He is challenging God.

Habakkuk is so observant of what is happening around him, of what is happening to his people and his city. He knows what the big nation players on the world stage are doing – doing to his beloved people. He is very astute and insightful. He sees what is going on in Judah and knows that her end is near. And it makes no sense to him. It seems to him that life is not fair at all. “Why do the wicked prosper?” he asks. “Why do the faithful often suffer? It isn’t fair. It ought not be that way. How can you, God, allow the wicked Babylonians to punish Judah? Why God? Why?”

The book of Habakkuk is set up as a dialogue between prophet and God. The prophet yells out his questions and his accusations, and then he retreats to his “watch-post” to wait for an answer. Says Habakkuk “I will stand at my watch-post, station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what God will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint”.

God does answer, though the prophet is not satisfied at all with that answer. Habakkuk begin another round of questions and complaints.

And God does answer him. It’s almost as if God is saying, “You don’t see a big enough picture, Habakkuk. In the end the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God (2:4). And the righteous will live by faith (2:4). (By the way, this phrase, “the righteous will live by their faith is quoted by Paul in Romans 1:17, and it also became Martin Luther’s rallying cry for launching the Protestant Reformation – The righteous will live by faith. This rallying cry comes from Habakkuk 2:4)

In the end, after the debate as it were, Habakkuk retreats back to his watch post to pray. His questions aren’t really fully answered, and yet he can pray, “I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work”. His provocative and almost scandalous questioning of God has born fruit. He sees more clearly, more deeply, and he kneels in prayer. In the end he finds trust and joy and thanksgiving even in the midst of trouble, even when all of his questions are not fully answered, even when exile is still looming.

The prophet’s final confession is this, “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stall, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my

salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights”.

Habakkuk discovers that thanksgiving is possible even when life is hard and unfair, even when the Babylonians are closing in, even when he can't fully understand the answers God gives to his questions.

2) August 10, 1957

On August 10, 1957, we farmers in Rosemary, Alberta, experienced what Habakkuk described. “The fields yield no food”.

I am 15 years old. It is ten minutes after 4 in the afternoon. I remember that. The moment is forever etched in my memory. We were sitting on the front porch of our house enjoying a cup of coffee before going back to work – back to irrigating our grain fields. We hear a strange, ominous sound from the south. The sky blackens. We dash out into the yard to see what it is. Then the hail struck. Ten minutes and it was all over. Everything in the fields was totally flattened.

In September we serviced out combine as usual, took it out to one field in the vain hope that our eyes weren't telling us the truth. But they were. There was no grain in the straw. A few kernels of wheat trickled out. They wouldn't pay for the cost of the gas. So, we put the combine away for the year.

Already stretched to make ends meet – we really were poor in those days, and the mortgage on the farm was not yet payed off. We would have to rely that year on the few dollars that came from selling a can of cream to the creamery every week – we had by then harvested our hay and had fodder for the cows. And we had pigs and chickens to butcher.

And then came thanksgiving weekend. Do you as a family still celebrate thanksgiving when your future is very much in doubt and you don't know how to pay the mortgage on the farm? Do you as a church still celebrate thanksgiving when a large number of farmers are hailed out and thanksgiving has always been associated with a bountiful harvest? Can you imagine living without basic income for your family for a whole year?

My parents said, “Yes. Of course, we will celebrate”. I’m sure they also cried out, “why God, why?” My church said, “Yes we will celebrate thanksgiving”. “Thanksgiving does not depend upon material prosperity, on a good harvest. We will trust that God will see us through. Now at least no one can brag about getting a bigger crop than did their neighbors. We are all in the same boat. We are all dependant on God”.

My parent’s and my churches response to tragedy made a deep impression on me. It seemed to this 15 year-old that that year of scarcity touched a deep chord of faith in many people. That year the thanksgiving service was particularly meaningful and memorable in the Rosemary Mennonite Church.

3) 1636 - Europe

The year is 1636. Europe is in the middle of the 30 years war – a religious war where Catholics and Protestants are busy killing each other – all in the name of Christ, of course. The wounded and dying and dead are everywhere. Then, as if there wasn’t already enough death, the so called “black death”, the plague unleashed by the war, swept over Europe, adding its misery to that of the war.

Martin Rinckart was a clergyman. At the worst moments of that war he conducted up to 40 funerals in one day. And during that time, he wrote the hymn “Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices.” His family sang this hymn daily as a table grace. He wanted his family to somehow keep a sense of thankfulness in the midst of unending tragedy. When the war finally ended, this hymn, “Now thank we all our God”, was sung in Eilenburg at the signing of the Peace of Westphalia.

4) Around the year 50 ad. (Acts 16)

Paul and Silas, in their missionary work, meet a slave girl. This girl apparently has a spirit of divination. She is a fortune teller. And her owners make a handsome profit out of her gift. Perhaps it is because of her gift of seeing that, when she meets Paul and Silas, she starts crying out for

everyone to hear, “These men are slaves of the most- High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation”.

Should be a good thing to have this free ad agency working for you, a partner in evangelism as it were, but this goes on day after day, and finally Paul gets so annoyed with her that he drives this spirit of divination out of her. Which doesn't please her owners one bit because now they are deprived of that source of income. So, they seize Paul and Silas, drag them before the authorities, who then strip them, beat them with rods, flog them, and throw them into jail.

And wouldn't you know it, at midnight they start singing – not dirges or laments, but praises to God. They sing so loud that all the other prisoners heard them. That is when the earthquake struck, demolishing the prison and setting them all free (Acts 16). But they were singing before the earthquake struck, before they were set free. They were singing praises to God while their bodies were in agony and before they were set free. And the prisoners? They were so taken by these hymns of praise that they stuck around when you would think they would be in a hurry to escape.

There is power in thanksgiving praises.

5) 1972 -A table grace in Edmonton

We are sitting at table in Edmonton. We pray a simple, rote, table grace. “God is great, and God is good, let us thank God for this food. Amen.

“Daddy, why do we pray before meals?” Our five-year old son is asking a deep theological question. “why do we pray before meals?”

“We thank God for our food, son”.

“But why, daddy? Mom cooks it.”

“Sure, son, but food is a gift from God”.

“But daddy, you work hard, and then you get paid, and then you buy the food that we eat. What has God got to do with it? Why do we pray a thank-you prayer before we eat, daddy?”

Ah, a little five-year old Habakkuk in the making. How do you explain to a five year old – or to anybody else, for that matter – that you want to live life under a bigger picture, that you believe God is the

ultimate creator and sustainer of life, that you want everything in life to be a breath of praise to God? How do you explain even to yourself that a table grace is a symbol of a thankful life, that it is as symbol of recognizing and acknowledging your dependence on God?

Of course, the table grace is routine, often recited thoughtlessly, carelessly, quickly. But it continues to be a symbol, and a reminder, of a life that wants to make thanksgiving a central core of life.

- 6) Two stories – a vigil and a death. These two stand out to this former pastor. The date is around a thanksgiving weekend, and yet has been repeated many times. Day one of the weekend is attendance at a vigil – at a death bed. The next day is a wedding.

First, the vigil. Here one does not expect thanksgiving. It is, after all, a death bed. It is a place of vigil, a place of tears. Solemn. Grief-filled. Painful. And full of surprises. Make that of “miracles”.

For one thing, this person is still alive, despite words from the medical people three weeks earlier that death would come in a day or two. Still alive and still lucid. And still thankful. Thankful for the loving family gathered around the bed. Thankful for a praying church. “Each day is a wonderful gift” says the weak, shaky voice. “This will be a thanksgiving like no other – I will be in the presence of God”.

The next day is a wedding. First a vigil, and then a wedding. The couple has deliberately chosen thanksgiving weekend. And one would expect some thanksgiving at a wedding. The occasion is joyful, full of love, full of wonderful hopes for the future. The whole wedding liturgy is crafted under the bold heading “Giving Thanks”. The couple want the hymn “Now thank we all our God” to be at the core of the service. Hymns and Scriptures and prayers and symbolic actions will proclaim thanksgiving to God. It is a joyful celebration – sacred, touched by awe, joy-filled.

A wedding and a death only a day apart. Both have a strong note of thanksgiving. It is a thanksgiving weekend.

7) The date is sometime after 850 B.C. I was given the lectionary texts for today, and I thought I should at least reference one of them - 2 Kings 5:1-15.

But I will cheat a bit and go to 2 Kings 6. The Arameans are at war with Israel. Their brash king Aram has death and destruction of Israel in his sights. But first he has to do away with the prophet Elisha who keeps on knowing what he is going to do, and so keeps on messing up his plans. Aram sends his army, first of all to get rid of Elisha, and then of course to get rid of Israel. But Elisha is a man of prayer. Elisha prays, and every soldier of Aram's army is struck blind. Elisha then leads that whole blind army into Samaria where they are at the mercy of the king of Israel.

The king of Israel exults. "Shall I kill them? Shall I kill them? This is our great chance". Says Elisha. "No. Don't kill them. Give them a feast. Set food and water before them." "So, he prepared a great feast (we will call it a thanksgiving feast)". "After they ate and drank, he sent them on their way...and the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel" Didn't Jesus say something about feeding your enemies? A thanksgiving feast and enemies stop being enemies.

I love that story. Feed your enemies. Throw a great feast, a thanksgiving feast. You have disarmed the enemy with a banquet.

I digress. But I can just see it – only in my imagination, of course. Trudeau and Sheer and Singh and May, and yes, maybe even Bernier, laughing together over heir turkey meal, telling each other, "well done in that debate yesterday", congratulating each other for how much they all love Canada. Or, Trump and Biden pouring wine for each other and wishing each other well in the coming election. And, of course, Ford and Tory exchanging jokes as they enjoy their desert and as they agree to work together on the next transit project for the city of Toronto. Might we even imagine Christians – of all stripes – left wing and right wing- pouring coffee for each other with genuine enjoyment, making plans together for how to put Jesus at the center of their witness. Where would it all lead if our world would offer hospitality and banquets rather than derision and vengeance?

8 – A final story - of two more thanksgiving feasts – 1973 & 2019

Once upon a time a young couple dreamed about the kind of family they wanted to have. The husband was quite young, and quite foolish. As they were walking in a park one day he said, “I would like to have a quiet home, very peaceful, not like our neighbors home where the radio and the television and the kids are always turned to high volume, and everything is always so noisy. I want to come home from work and we’ll sit together, or perhaps listen quietly to music or watch the sunset. And I hope we have 3 or 4 children.” And that is why he was foolish. He wanted children and he also wanted a quiet home.

His wife smiled to herself. She said, I want a home which has a lot of life and energy in it. When we come home from work, I want to talk and laugh and do things. And I too want 3 or 4 children, maybe two girls and a boy, or two boys and a girl, or maybe two of each.

And they both were very happy as they dreamed of the future together – even though one of them was a bit foolish.

Soon a baby was born. Now they were mom and dad. And they were very excited as they took their baby boy to visit their parents and their friends at the church. They took him along everywhere they went, even to classes at college. And when this baby cried in the evening, and sometimes in the night, mom smiled a bit when she remembered their dreams. And dad frowned a bit – and then smiled. They were very happy.

And after a while another baby was born. Mom and dad held him in their arms and thanked God for him too. And they proudly showed him off, and took him to classes sometimes too. Some evenings both baby boys cried, and as they got a bit older, they would even fight with each other occasionally, and there was lots of noise in the house. Most of the time mom smiled. Dad sometimes sighed, but then he would smile too. They really were happy, even though it wasn’t very peaceful or very quiet in their home anymore.

One day mom said to dad, “I wish we had a little girl. I would like a daughter”. And dad said, “I would like a daughter too. Do you think daughters would be quieter than sons”?

And so, they prayed for a daughter. And they said to each other, “What if we adopt a daughter? Maybe that is what God wants us to do. Maybe there is a little girl out there who needs a mom and a dad and two noisy brothers. And we want a daughter, and we just have to find each other.”

So, they called a social worker. The social worker asked them many questions. She wanted to know if they would be good adoptive parents. The social worker said, “I will put you on the list of parents who want to adopt a child. It may be a long wait”.

Mom and dad waited and prayed. They waited nine months. Their two sons grew and became even noisier. But they heard nothing more from the social worker.

On Friday morning of Thanksgiving weekend, 1973, mom turned to dad and said, “I have a strange feeling. I think the phone is going to ring today. It will be the social worker. I just know it. We are going to get our thanksgiving daughter”.

All day long mom and dad waited for the phone to ring. But the phone was silent. At 4:00 mom said, “I guess I was wrong. The office will be closed now for thanksgiving weekend. I feel so disappointed”.

15 minutes later the phone did ring. And it was the social worker. And she said, “We have a little girl who needs a home. She is 2 ½ years old. She has black hair. She is an indigenous girl. Can you come to see her on Monday in Calgary”?

Mom and dad and the two sons were very excited. They were even noisier than usual. They could hardly wait for Monday. And when they saw this 2 ½ year old black-haired girl they knew that she was the perfect daughter and sister for them, and they knew they would love her very much. She was their very special thanksgiving gift from God.

What they didn’t know, was that they were becoming a part of a much larger government project – later called the “sixties scoop”. What they were oblivious to, was the horrible tragedy of the residential school system, the systematic attempt “to take the Indian out of the Indian” – a system which had done so much damage to this child’s parents. What they didn’t know was the generational pain of this ongoing story.

Mom and dad were both very naive – and perhaps a bit foolish. And yet – and yet – it was thanksgiving weekend. And now their home was much noisier yet. Daughters can be very loud too, you know – and every thanksgiving after that they would have a party in celebration of that thanksgiving gift. And they were mostly very happy, even though they had lost their naivety, and had quite a few crisis, and learned so much about the bigger picture of inter-racial relationships.

And so it was that thanksgiving weekend 2019 started with a huge banquet on the incredibly beautiful Sagamok First Nations land, fully embraced by son-in-law’s Ojibway family. The celebration will continue in Toronto with very noisy grandchildren, white and indigenous, filling the house with sound.

Said this foolish father, “you know, sometimes “noisy” is even better than quiet – as long as there is some peace and quiet afterword.” That first thanksgiving, long ago in 1973, he couldn’t even imagined how much he would come to love each member of this growing family, no matter how much literal - and political – noise and turbulence attended the journey.

Conclusion

Thanksgiving does sometimes break out in surprizing places – a war, a jail, a watch post, a hailed-out farm, a dinner table, a wedding, a death bed, a great feast, the naïve decisions of foolish parents. But maybe that should not surprize us. All of these places are places where God is present. And when we live – and die – in the presence of God, thanksgiving and praise bubbles up everywhere.