

“The Only Way Through”
Isaiah 12:1-6 and I Thessalonians 5:12-22

On an evening in late September of 1991, I sat in the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church here in Spokane. I was waiting for a memorial service to begin. The memorial service was being held for the wife, four-year-old daughter, and mother of my good friend and professor of Religion at Whitworth College, Dr. Jerry Sittser.

Jerry’s wife, daughter and mother had all been tragically killed in a car accident near Plummer, Idaho. Their car had been struck at high speed by a drunk driver. Jerry and his other three children were also in the car, but had been spared.

As I sat in the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church, I wondered what Pastor Dave Peterson could possibly say to comfort the numb and heartbroken congregation that had gathered that evening. To a person, we were all struggling to make sense of this seemingly senseless tragedy.

Even though it has been over 15 years since I attended that memorial service, I can still remember clearly the main points of Dave’s message to us that night. He began by honestly telling us how much he had struggled to find the right words to comfort and encourage us. He went on to say that he was convinced that the only way through...the only way we would make it through this tragedy was to give thanks.

Over the next several minutes, Dave spoke about how the only reasonable response to our loss was to give thanks that night to God: to give thanks to God for the gift of life; to give thanks to God for Lynda, Diana Jane and Grace’s lives, and, finally, to give thanks to God for the indescribable gift of eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

To be sure, we were a fellowship of “unlikely thankers.” But, we did give thanks that night, and as we gave thanks, we did come to believe that it was the way through...the way through the grief and pain of the present moment, and the way through the many days that lay ahead.

The people of God in our second scripture reading for this morning also constitute what I would call a fellowship of “unlikely thankers.” You’ll remember that our text for last week from Isaiah 58 was set in the period after the return of God’s people to Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile. Our text for this morning is set in the period before the exile.

This was a dark period for God’s people. The northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah had become a vassal state of Assyria. They were in sad shape politically. But, they were in even worse shape spiritually. The chapters preceding our reading for today outline the wickedness of God’s people in the southern kingdom, and the judgment that they could expect to endure as a consequence of their wickedness.

It certainly doesn’t seem to be a likely time to call the people of God to give thanks, but nevertheless that is the call extended in chapter 12 of Isaiah. Let’s turn there and listen for God’s word.

Would you describe yourself as a likely or unlikely thanker today as we gather for worship in this place? When life is moving along smoothly...when we’re enjoying good health...good family relations...and satisfying work...we’re likely thankers. It seems only logical to offer thanks to God when the waters of our lives are calm and tranquil. But, what about those times when life is not so smooth...when we find ourselves

confronting uncertain health, strained relationships, financial struggles, or unexpected loss? These are the times when we are “unlikely thankers”...when it just doesn’t seem right or logical to offer thanks to God.

Perhaps one of the most unlikely thankers in all of Scripture would be the Apostle Paul. Paul endured significant suffering, hardship, and even imprisonment as he sought to faithfully serve Christ. And yet, in our first scripture lesson for this morning, we hear him say, “...give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Paul says that whatever our circumstances might be, give thanks.

Now remember, Paul is not asking us to thank God for all the circumstances we confront. We thank God for answered prayer or a clean bill of health. It seems a bit odd to thank God for a broken leg, cancer or financial struggles.

Paul says be thankful in all circumstances...affirming that God is God and still worthy of our thanks and praise in both likely and unlikely times.

But, regardless of the preposition we use, let’s face it, sometimes we find ourselves in the midst of circumstances in which it seems impossible to offer thanks to God. It just seems too hard, too painful and too difficult.

It’s in times like these, when spontaneous thanks just won’t seem to come, that we need a reminder of why it’s always right to give thanks to God, regardless of our circumstances.

That’s where our text from Isaiah 12 comes in. It serves as a reminder of many good reasons why the people of God prior to the Babylonian exile could offer thanks even in the midst of difficult circumstances, and why you and I today can also offer thanks regardless of our circumstances.

So, what reasons does our text cite as reasons for which we should give thanks? Our first reason to give thanks is found in verse 1. “You will say on that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.”

This verse reminds us to give thanks to God for the gift of forgiveness. Bible teacher Steve Brown once described his job with these words, “I travel around the country trying to convince people that God isn’t mad at them – and it’s a tough sell.” As a pastor who has spent all of my adult life trying to communicate God’s grace and forgiveness to people, I would have to agree with Steve Brown. It is a tough sell. Not because God isn’t gracious and forgiving, but because people are often reluctant to accept what God freely offers.

I’ve learned in more than 25 years of ministry that I don’t have to try to make people feel guilty. They already feel guilty. I talk with a lot of people who are convinced that God is so angry with them that God would never forgive them. Since we are often so reluctant to forgive ourselves, we assume that God is equally reluctant to forgive us. But, nothing could be further from the truth.

More than anything else, God desires that we might experience the amazing comfort of the forgiveness he extends to us in Jesus Christ. Christian author Corrie ten Boom once said, “When God forgives he forgets. He buries our sins in the sea and puts up a sign on the bank saying, ‘No fishing allowed.’” Friends, when you put your trust in Christ, your sins are forgiven and forgotten, and that’s a great reason to give thanks to God.

The second reason to give thanks is found in verse 2. “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.”

This verse reminds us to give thanks for God’s gift of strength in our weakest moments. Recently, a member of our congregation described to me a difficult work situation. Many times this person had literally felt at the end of his rope. But, each time, when at his weakest and ready to give up, he had prayed and received the strength necessary to keep trying to make the situation better.

In Psalm 27:1 we are reminded of the gift of God’s strength in our weakest moments. “The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?” The promise of God’s strength in our weakest moments is another great reason to give thanks to God.

The third reason to give thanks is found in verse 3 of our text. “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” This verse reminds us to give thanks to God for the gift of joy that is never in short supply.

Even when we find ourselves in the midst of difficult situations, God gives us the gift of his joy. Joy is not a fleeting emotion, present in good times, but absent in hard times. Joy is a deep and abiding sense of “it is well” even when our circumstances don’t seem to confirm the well-being in our souls. Joy is the direct result of God’s unfailing presence with us throughout all the days of our lives. The provision of the gift of joy is yet another great reason to offer thanks to God.

The gift of forgiveness...the gift of strength in your weakest moments...and the gift of joy that is never in short supply. For these, and the many other gifts that are showered upon us by the giver of all good gifts, we are called to give thanks.

Today, as well as I know many of you, I certainly don’t know all the situations you may be confronting. Some of you may be likely thankers...you are healthy, family and friends are by your side, your basic needs are addressed, and life is reasonably stable and fulfilling. If these are your circumstances, thank the Lord!

Undoubtedly, some of you are unlikely thankers today. As we have gathered in this place, you find yourself confronting uncertain health, strained relationships, financial insecurities or the loss of someone or something that is dear to you. If these are your circumstances, I gently invite you, too, to thank the Lord. Not for these present circumstances, but for the God who promises you forgiveness, strength, and joy that will never be in short supply today and tomorrow.

Whether we are likely or unlikely thankers, our Lord invites us this morning to come to the table to receive the good gifts that he has prepared for us. As we come to the table, let us offer profound thanks to our loving and gracious God, knowing, as A.W. Tozer once said that “...gratitude is an offering precious in the sight of God, and it is one that the poorest of us can make and not be poorer but richer for having made it.”

May it be so that all honor and glory may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

- Robin Garvin
Feb. 4, 2007