

Thanksgiving Prayer (Thanksgiving Series 2)
Philippians 4:4-9 & Habakkuk 3:17-19
November 14, 2021
First Presbyterian, Luling

When we were in seminary, I thought I was busy. Really busy. I had four or five classes to juggle. We were just married, and were managing a household for the first time. Groceries and cleaning our four room apartment. Remembering to renew the car insurance and all kinds of grownup things. Looking back, it was quite a luxury to be busy in only one area of life—studying. Sure, there was lots of reading. Lots. And lots of writing. And lots of learning. But the rest of my life was fairly manageable. I knew that some of my fellow students had children and other jobs, but it didn't occur to me that my life was simpler or easier. At this distance, I'm quite certain that my life was easier and simpler.

I may have told you this before, but in our four room apartment, we did not have a dishwasher. Though I am now a person who cleans up the kitchen every single night before I can settle down to go to sleep, back then we tended to let the dirty dishes pile up in the sink for a couple of days. One day, I was standing there in the tee-niny kitchen, washing dishes, staring at the wall in front of the sink, and it dawned on me that I was actually thankful that we didn't have a dishwasher. Because standing there washing dishes was a time when I could think and pray and not be busy.

I am now busier in any number of directions, all at the same time, and I am quite thankful to have a dishwasher—for several years in the first parsonage we lived in, we called it the magic white box. I am also quite thankful to have a window above the sink, so when I'm cleaning up the kitchen and putting dirty dishes in the dishwasher, I have something to look at besides the wall.

When the girls were babies, we had a mop sink in the laundry room, and I would be standing there scrubbing out unmentionable stains from their tiny clothes, and I would think "I'm so thankful I live in a time where I don't have to hand scrub all of our laundry like this!"

Prayers of thanksgiving sometimes come to me like that. Suddenly, a feeling of gratitude washes over me. But sometimes I don't take the time to recognize that feeling of gratitude, or I'm moving too fast, or I'm overwhelmed with stressful things. It's easy to focus on the negative things and turn aside from giving thanks for little things. Or I think they're not important enough to matter. It's increasingly easy to get caught up in the swirl of bad news and discouraging developments. On the other hand, when things are going well, it's equally easy to forget to give thanks for things we become conditioned to take for granted. That "taking things for granted" process happens quickly, too! In February, I remember thinking, "I will forevermore be grateful every time I flush the toilet!" But now in November, I've gone back to taking running water for granted and flushing without being thankful.

The reading from Philippians is pretty direct. "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." In everything, with thanksgiving. And don't worry about anything, which Jesus also said. In all circumstances, don't worry but give thanks. Way easier said than done.

I'm guessing that the Philippians reading may have been familiar to you, and I'm also guessing that the reading from Habakkuk is not familiar to you. The whole book is only three chapters, and we read from the very end of it. The book appears once in the three year lectionary, but not this passage. The book is essentially a long lament from the prophet, about how awful things are. He's not exaggerating—things are indeed awful. The next chapter is God's response, essentially telling Habakkuk and the people that they'll just have to wait and be patient for God's plan to be enacted. The third chapter begins with an outline of all the bad things that will happen to their enemies, but again, they'll have to wait and be patient for all this to happen. And then the final chapter is Habakkuk's prayer.

Much like the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving that we talked about last week, and much like many of the psalms, the bulk of Habakkuk's prayer is a recitation of God's mighty and merciful deeds through

the history of the people. God has been faithful and merciful and powerful. Habakkuk was in fearful awe, and promises to wait quietly for God's wrath to come upon their enemies.

And then he closes with the verses we read. 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 stalls. That's pretty dire, pretty sobering, pretty desperate. But though there is no food and no hope of food, Habakkuk continues his prayer: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation."

In the worst of circumstances, Habakkuk is able to rejoice, to give thanks to God for salvation. Remarkable.

In everything by prayer, with thanksgiving, make your requests made known to God. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. Our ancestors in the faith are good models for us, models of Thanksgiving prayer, in the midst of all circumstances.

In times when that feeling of gratitude washes over you, give thanks for whatever it is you're thankful for—dishwasher, washing machine, family gathered around the table, friends calling to check in and say hi. But also give thanks for that wave of gratitude, because what a gift that is, the Spirit calling our attention to something we might have otherwise overlooked.

In times when setbacks and discouragement loom large and threatening, say prayers of thanksgiving for God's presence.

In times when things seem hopeless and God seems to have been saying "wait" and "be patient" for longer and more frequently than a human ought to be expected to hear them, give thanks, too, for God's faithfulness over the years and generations.

Goodness knows that these past couple of years have challenged our capacity to be thankful, and to say prayers of thanksgiving. None of us are immune to discouragement and despair. Neither are we exempt from the instructions to give thanks and rejoice in the Lord always.