

'The Prayer 20/20 Impact' - Come Ye Thankful People, Come and Pray! November 22nd, 2020

Dear Praying Friends, and Partners In Prayer Team, and whole Church Family,

*"Do not fret because of those who are evil
or be envious of those who do wrong;
for like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.
Trust in the Lord and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Take delight in the Lord,
and He will give you the desires of your heart."
Psalm 37:1-4 (NIV)*



How do we remain thankful this Thanksgiving and keep our sanity in a topsy-turvy world? The year 2020 started with a flourish. Our verse was: "Walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). Who would have predicted that it would be such a challenge to that verse? By all indications the economy was on a tear. Business was booming! People were employed! Infrastructure improvements were underway! Generally speaking, the world was at peace, or at least as peaceful as it has been in a while. Even the weather was fairly "normal," or should I say cooperative?

And then things began to unravel. News began to leak of a novel coronavirus discovered on foreign soil. It seemed to be one of those things that would never touch us. I even remember praying with a pastor who said his church had a medical missionary doctor over in that area of China, and there really wasn't much to worry about. But then it became evident that with the human populace it was not a matter of if, but when, the virus would make its way to the U.S. It affected our missionaries immediately, and we also were fearful for family members traveling abroad that they would not get home to the U.S. The fallout was immediate when it hit. Nonessential businesses shut down, schools closed for the remainder of the year, stay-at-home orders were issued; and in a matter of a few weeks our lifestyles were radically altered. We had never faced a time when the entire church around the world was stopped and normal and traditional practices were suddenly stopped. Remember the turn towards online services at Easter?

Most everyone accepted the temporary shutdown, choosing to engage in a variety of activities that included outdoor recreation. Our daughter, like many, stayed home from her university to finish online. Many of our people lost jobs and went on unemployment. The whole system broke down. Many to-do lists were condensed during this time. When we finally got the courage to go

shopping with gloves, masks, and sanitizers, the shelves were empty. One of our members said it reminded him of the days during WW2 when he was a kid, and people were forced to ration food and supplies.

Patience began to wear thin, and many in our society became restless with being stuck at home. Slowly things began to reopen, although on a limited basis, even as the virus continued its march through various states and communities. But I noticed a horrible division working through the American church. People became divisive and hurtful over the insignificant issues. Much of morality became politicized. People, who were brothers and sisters in Christ, started fighting on Facebook and calling names. The family of God was being spoiled by pride and selfishly unforgiving behavior. We all were affected. And I began to pray, “Lord, what is it that You are trying to teach us as a church? Are we receiving judgment for our mediocracy as believers? Are we facing a judgment for our lack of love and trust in You? Are You taking all the things we delight and trust in, and making Christianity real for us? Will people become so comfortable in their jammies and coffee that they will not recommit to local church again?” Even the pastors I’ve prayed with weekly have said things like: “We just don’t understand why those who we’ve touched, served, and loved for so long, are not returning to church. How can they call themselves Christians, and not want to be worshiping with God’s people and giving of themselves to the Lord? Are people falling away because they were never really Christian?” A new normal, with reduced occupancy, limited services, and curtailed hours began to unfold. Through this time I kept praying, “Lord, what is it You want us to do? How do we get back to the basics?”



Then a wave of protests, fueled in part by the horrible death of a black man at the hands of police officers, began to manifest an undercurrent of racial tension. Accusations of discrimination and the use of lethal force were questioned. Some of the accusations were valid, others were not. Rioting and looting of stores and businesses, and protest marches headlined the news. The civil unrest rattled the state governments and conflicting mandates started to force all of us to walk a tightrope of political correctness. The church showed itself generally to be full of fearful people who are “consumer” like in their approach to worship. Everything seemed to keep going “inward and one-way” instead of sacrificially going out of our way to help and serve others. We started to see things that we never imagined would occur which reminded us of the “end times.” Then the churches started fighting over their view of end times. Fear of the unknown future is a reality for many! Where is the world headed? What does life have to offer? How can I plan for my financial future? With all the mandates and layers of authority, to whom am I responsible?

Churches, schools, businesses, organizations, families, and individuals all need to grapple with these questions. Now Covid-19 is resurging, which scientifically and medically we were warned would happen. But this time, we have more anger and frustration. People are not seeing the situation with Christ's eyes and compassion. Instead we are only seeing people gripe and yell at each other over selfishness and mask wearing. We continue to get sidelined with the wrong issues.



As a witness for Christ, we may need to be prepared to pull back our pride and remember to give up our “I won't wear a mask” thinking to instead be thinking, “What if someone who needs to hear from the Lord will stay away from church because he or she sees us acting entitled?” Trust me I am also personally fighting these demons. I don't like the idea of wearing a mask on Sundays but have tried to be an example of Christ first and put myself last. What if someone enters our church and we miss sharing Christ with them?

We are entering the Christmas season, and it was my heart's desire to stop the recordings and online messages because pastors all through the area have struggled with questions, such as: “Why are we encouraging people to keep from worshiping in the presence of the Lord? Are we enabling them to keep away?” True, some seniors and those susceptible have every right to stay away. My mom is a primary example of that. But the people who are mostly not returning to church are the ones who just lazily never return and have no issues. That may sound judgmental of me, but the facts are true. Every Bible teaching church in our area and county are struggling with “Why are the faithful not being faithful?” I learned as a boy, long before the coronavirus, that when you get yourself out of the habit of going to church, it is harder to get yourself back into the habit of church. It was by prayer and searching, that our elders decided to put a possible end date for the online recording of our services. We wanted the focus to go back to the Lord, and not the making of a performance.

Then when the election hit, the most perplexing thing occurred. Our online viewing went from an average of less than twenty, to suddenly 200 on Sunday the 8th. What happened? I often wondered if people just wanted to see what “I thought” about the political situation. If that really was the reason for the sudden jump, it did do one thing, it reminded me that “what I think” about the things in this world really means nothing! What we all should be worried about is “what is God thinking of us?” So the Lord has turned our hearts to study Psalm 37 to prepare our hearts for Thanksgiving and Christmas and ending the year. What is it we should be committed to? Not to fret or be jealous or envious of those in this world. Psalm 37:4-5 says, “Be delighted with the Lord. Then He will give you all your heart's desires. Commit everything you do to the Lord. Trust Him to help you do it, and He will.” Then it reminds us in

verses 23-24: “The steps of good men are directed by the Lord. He delights in each step they take. If they fall, it isn’t fatal, for the Lord holds them with His hand.” So we are lastly told this in verse 34: “Don’t be impatient for the Lord to act! Keep traveling steadily along His pathway and in due season He will honor you with every blessing, and you will see the wicked destroyed.”

In the midst of all this change, upheaval, and trouble, there is one thing that hasn’t changed one bit, and that is God! He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His mandates haven’t changed from the beginning of time. Obedience and waiting, and trusting, and committing and finding our ultimate delight in



Him is the real bottom line of everything we should be doing. I challenge you and dare you to embark on a life of “delight” and that it would be your goal over the next month into Christmas, to embark on a relationship with God in which you delight in Him and He delights in you. If we were to go around and ask people if they love God, most everyone would say “Yes, I do.” But they profess a love

that says. “We are Christian atheists.” They say they love God, but live their lives as if He doesn’t exist. How can this be? We need to make our love an active love. Delighting in the Lord is love doing “cartwheels”. We need to personally step it up a notch. We need to understand that our moments are getting us ready for a spiritual soul harvest. It may be the coming of Jesus, maybe... I could never say when. Or it could be a harvest of seeing God revive hard “ringing rock-like hearts.” I don’t know, but I do know we must be ready for the harvest. Jesus said to His disciples after His stomach twisted in compassion at the people who were around Him, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.” The harvest is coming! Are you praying? Are you ready for the harvest? Or are you fretting in this topsy-turvy world? If we want to make it through these times, we must fix our eyes upon Jesus and be anchored in the Word of God. Then, in the midst of change, and chaos, and confusion, we have a point of reference to which we can turn, again and again and again! In the midst of insanity, we find Someone we can trust, Someone who provides stability, an Eternal unchanging God, who delights in those who seek His face, trust Him and strive to obey. This is our only sanity in a topsy-turvy world that is spinning seemingly out of control.

Through the last three weeks I’ve shared the story behind two of the Thanksgiving songs we traditionally sing: “Come Ye Thankful People, Come” and “We Gather Together.” (Go on the church website and read the *Partners in Prayer* for the weeks of Sunday the 8th and 15th). But the song I want to share which has given the most encouragement during this harvest season has been one called “Now Thank We All Our God.” The words of the first verse go like this:

***"Now thank we all our God,
with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom this world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms
has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today."***

For modern American Protestant church-goers, the hymn "Now Thank We All Our God," likely conjures up an image of a congregation singing in unison, a pipe organ blasting away at a stately tempo, and a church full of people thinking about the approaching feast of stuffed turkey with cranberry sauce. In order to understand where this hymn came from, I would like to offer a very different image: a minister and his family sing this hymn before dinner to thank God for the scraps of food they had on the table in their meager home in a desolate refugee city that was afflicted with famine and disease and war. Since the earliest projected date for this hymn is 1636 and the oldest known date is 1663, this hymn was certainly written during or soon after the Thirty Years' War in Germany (1618-1648).

Martin Rinckart (1586-1649) was an accomplished musician and pastor who wrote this song. He was living in a worn torn topsy-turvy area of the country. Martin Rinckart served as a pastor in the walled town of Eilenburg during the horrors of the Thirty Years' War of 1618-1648. Eilenburg became an overcrowded refuge for the surrounding area. The fugitives suffered from epidemic and famine. At the beginning of 1637, the year of the Great Pestilence, there were four ministers in Eilenburg. But one abandoned his post for healthier areas and could not be persuaded to return. Pastor Rinckart officiated at the funerals of the other two.

As the only pastor left, he often conducted funeral services for as many as 40 to 50 persons a day—some 4,480 in all. In May of that year, his own wife died. By the end of the year, the refugees had to be buried in trenches without services. In the face of overwhelming pressure, constant risk and horrendous conditions, Rinckart never stopped ministering to the people of his city. He gave away nearly everything he owned to the poor and needy, though he could barely clothe and feed his own children. He mortgaged his own future income to provide for his family and his community. At one point toward the end of the war, the Swedish army surrounded the city and demanded an enormous ransom from the impoverished and starving citizens. Knowing his people didn't have the money, Rinckart pleaded with the Swedes to lower the amount, only to be rejected. It's reported that Rinckart returned to the city, fell on his knees and said, ***"Come, my children, we can find no hearing, no mercy with men, let us take refuge with God."*** He then began to pray so fervently that the Swedish general was moved to lower his price to less than five percent of

the original sum. After nearly thirty years of ceaseless struggles, it began to look like peace was within grasp. Wanting to give his children a song to sing to God in thanks at the dinner table, Rinckart sat down and composed what would become one of the most well-known Thanksgiving hymns of all time — “Now Thank We All Our God.” In fact, it’s been said that aside from Martin Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” no other song is sung more often in Lutheran churches today than Rinckart’s simple tune. The text of the first two stanzas are based on Isaiah 50:22-24: “Now therefore bless ye the God of all, which only doeth wondrous things everywhere, which exalted our days from the womb, and dealeth with us according to His mercy. He grants us joyfulness of heart, and that peace may be in our days in Israel forever (KJV).”

It is much like what we are all experiencing during this time as the deaths from the coronavirus have hit the highest in America as compared to the rest of the world. And astonishingly we are the most modern and have the most resources. This experience during the Thirty Years’ War had a profound impact on Rinckart’s writing of this poem. It is his second verse that gives me the most hope:

***“O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us;
and keep us still in grace,
and guide us when perplexed;
and free us from all ills,
in this world and the next.”***

The second stanza of the hymn moves to the future, praying for guidance and a continuation of thanks and praise using three successive phrases: “and keep us...,” “and guide us...,” “and free us...” The three verbs are arranged in an implied chronological order that leads up to the final phrase “this world and the next.” For someone in Rinckart’s dire situation, this expression of abundant gratitude might seem like hyperbole. If you don’t live in constant fear of starvation, the plague, and invading armies, you are already quite a bit more fortunate than he. Only a few of the 66 hymns in Rinckart’s collections were reprinted into German hymnbooks; “Now Thank We All Our God” was translated into English for British hymnals by Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878) and finally made it into our tradition of a praise and thanksgiving song. Would we love people like that through this Covid-19 pandemic? I say we don’t. Many won’t. And never will try.

So as you get to this year’s Thanksgiving table, take the advice of David as shared at the end of Psalm 37. I love the Living Bible Paraphrase: “*Don’t be impatient for the Lord to act! Keep traveling steadily along His pathway and in due season He will honor you with every blessing, and you will see the wicked destroyed. I myself have seen it happen: a proud and evil man, towering like a*

cedar of Lebanon, but when I looked again, he was gone! I searched but could not find him! But the good man—what a different story! For the good man—the blameless, the upright, the man of peace—he has a wonderful future ahead of him. For him there is a happy ending. But evil men shall be destroyed, and their posterity shall be cut off. The Lord saves the godly! He is their salvation and their refuge when trouble comes. Because they trust in Him, He helps them and delivers them from the plots of evil men” (vs. 34-40). Also make it your prayer to “delight with an active ‘cartwheel’ love in Him!”

Pray with me,

“Precious Heavenly Father, many of us come before You today with troubled hearts and minds because of these troubling times and fretful circumstances which are out of our control, yet certainly still in Yours. We are fearful about our relationships, our health, our finances, our families, our futures, and many other things. Jesus, thank You for Your fearless faith. Thank You that for the joy that was set before You, You persevered through far greater pain and suffering than anything we will ever suffer to die for us and to wipe away our tears and comfort our broken hearts through choosing to love us. We choose to delight in You. Be our greatest delight in these days ahead. Holy Spirit, help us to believe in Christ. Help us to live in the light of our full forgiveness, and find great delight in the sufficiency of Your grace to us in Jesus Christ. In His Name, we pray, amen.”

Quote: “Choose your love, and love your choice. Choose your love; God did. At Mount Sinai, God essentially declared to His people, ‘I have chosen you, to love you, and I will love you. And as I have chosen you, choose me and love me. And you will know life as you love me’ (cf. Deut. 30:20). God - not in some vague, fuzzy way, but to know God as He is, the living God of pursuing, relentless love. This is the God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ and calls us to belong to Him through Christ and to discover the saving love He has for lost people. This is a call to freedom, to throw out the life-stealing false values and loves of our hearts, and to choose and know the God who has chosen us. A rescuer and covenant maker, He is also owner of His people. As rescuer and owner, he has sovereign rights over us, to call us to loving obedience. The call for us is that the whole of our lives be a response of worship to God, loving Him, honoring Him in every single thing we do. He is the God of perfect, life-bringing love. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) treats this commandment in this unforgettable way: Q. 94. ‘What does the Lord require in the first commandment? A. That I, not wanting to endanger my very salvation, avoid and shun all idolatry, magic, and superstitious rites, that I sincerely acknowledge the only true God, trust Him alone, look to Him for every good thing humbly and patiently, love Him, fear Him, and honor Him with all my heart.’ These sentences flood our hearts with both the challenge and exalting truth: will you really believe that your God can and will meet all your needs, so that you will bring Him

all of the love and trust HE is so very worthy of? God is not reserved, cold, and aloof. He is not standoffish. Through His Son, God stands among us, comes to us, embraces us, reassures us, and encourages us. He is the God who touched Mount Sinai and make it shake; He's also the God-man who died on Mount Calvary. He loves us, and He wants us to know that He loves us. Even when we can't feel His presence He is near. Unless you know that your Redeemer, your husband, your Good Shepherd, Your friend, the one who has died for you and come back from the grave, who reigns on high, ruling in love and wisdom over your life, and preparing a place for you so that you might dwell with Him forever, delights in you, loves you, died to save you, and sent His Spirit to empower you to love Him, the obedience because what it really is, a blood bought and Spirit-enabled privilege. Choose Him. Delight to love Him with all your hearts, soul, mind and strength!" ... Lewis Allen, Loves' Choice, page 120-121.

NOW THANK WE
ALL OUR GOD

