

¹ *Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.*

² *Worship the LORD with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.*

³ *Know that the LORD is God.
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*

⁴ *Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.*

⁵ *For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations. (Psalm 100)*

How Full of Gratitude are We for 2020?

The other day, my wife was doing some online Christmas shopping and she ran across an ad for a special ornament commemorating the year 2020. Can you guess what it was? Toilet paper. That pretty much sums up the way many people feel about this year. And, there's no denying it has been a challenging year. Months of dealing with the COVID pandemic is probably at the top of our list, but what about months of civil unrest? What about a record number of hurricanes? What about a political process that exasperated people on all sides of almost every question? What about all the things I'm leaving out? It's been a tough year. But you know what? Even with COVID shut downs and online college, even with toilet paper shortages and mandatory mask wearing, for me, 2019 was a much worse year than 2020, and I'm sure you all know why. The thing is, I'm not alone in that. Lots of people lost people in 2019. Lots of people had homes burn down or businesses fail in 2019. Lots of people got cancer or got divorced in 2019. It's silly for us to treat this year as if it were some kind of standard for tragedy. Every year in this sinful world brings challenges. That's not going to change until Jesus comes back. Still, I bet that many of us would argue that this year has had some challenges that we've never had to face before. That is true. So, given the general consensus that this has been a particularly difficult year, what do we do now that we've come to our annual celebration of Thanksgiving?

How full of gratitude are we for 2020?

I.

Psalm 100 calls us to shout for joy to all the earth. It calls us to worship the Lord with gladness and to sing joyful songs in his presence. In a year full of frustration and challenges, in a world full of sadness and pain, can we do that? **How full of gratitude are we for 2020? As full as only God's people can be.**

Thanksgiving is a time when we reflect on all that God has given us, especially in this life, and we thank him for it. Many families have the tradition of asking each person to name something that they're thankful for. We've never done that in my family, and sometimes I wonder if we should. We live in a world in which it's easy to find people who are negative about life. Social media is full of ironic posts and memes about how terrible things are. Really clever ones get shared over and over again. And I'm as guilty of that as anybody else. But the problem that comes from that fascination with all that's wrong with our lives is that it makes us very negative people. I can't help but wonder if that contributes to the incredibly high rates of depression and anxiety and even suicide in our country today. Maybe we could all benefit from an exercise in counting the blessings God has given us.

Now, I don't mean to imply that the hurts and sorrows we face aren't real. They are. But has 2020 gone by with no blessings at all? Did any of us here at Peace find ourselves living on the street in 2020? Did any of us have to put our kids to bed hungry in 2020? We may have lost jobs. We may have taken huge financial hits and we may have some real anxiety about how we're going to take care of those kids in the new year. But God did not abandon us. Even if we or people we love are so sick that the end of this life is coming, even in that, God is working. He gives us people to share the burden. He gives us a roof over our heads and food to eat.

Every day, he protects us from harm and danger. Those are things to be thankful for, even while we struggle with the all the real and painful challenges of this life.

Psalm 100 says, **“Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.”** Where do all the blessings of this life come from? From God who made the world. From God who rules this world and works through it. So, you and I go to our jobs and send our kids to school, we pay our bills and save for our retirements, we go to doctors and get vaccinations and wear our masks in public. And God works in all that for our good. He is hiding behind all those things and he blesses our efforts – as he sees fit certainly – but he gives us all that we need. Why does he do that? Because he made us and we are his. God created us in our mothers’ wombs. We have lived our whole lives as objects of his love.

Do we give thanks for that love? Or do we let the hurts and frustrations of this life crowd all gratefulness out of our hearts? Do we have to be forced to come up with something positive to say because we are so unhappy with our lives in 2020? If so, do you think that’s a God-pleasing way to live? Obviously not. It’s a total lack of gratitude. It’s an implied criticism of God’s love and care for us. It’s sin pure and simple. That sin runs deep in the hearts of all people, including us. And it deserves God’s punishment in hell forever.

But thankfully, God’s love found its greatest expression in the gospel. God made us his true people through the gospel. The gospel is all about what Jesus did for us: he never whined about anything. Jesus was grateful to his Father in heaven for every blessing he ever received. Jesus never compared his sorry lot in life with all those people who had more than he did here. He never asked what was wrong with God’s love. He always trusted that God gave him what was absolutely best for him at that moment in his life. And he did all that in our place. It now counts for us. God sees us having that wonderful attitude of trust and thanksgiving every day of our lives, because Jesus did.

And then Jesus died and paid for all the sin and ingratitude in our hearts. Jesus suffered the just punishment for all our whining and complaining and failing to see God’s love. Jesus washed all that sin away. Then he rose and we are forgiven. Our sin is gone, so we, too, will rise and live. We’ll live with Jesus in a perfect world where nothing will ever tempt us to complain again. Between this life and that resurrection, we’ll live with Jesus in heaven and be just as perfect. For now, God calls us to live here as his forgiven children. He calls us to worship him with gladness. He calls us to trust that Jesus is our Good Shepherd and that he will tend us, his sheep, every day. Celebrate that love with glad and grateful hearts this Thanksgiving.

II.

Can we do that? It might be a little harder this year. Many of us are not going to have the kind of family get togethers we’re used to having. The holiday might ring a little hallow without the people we love sitting with us at dinner. In the midst of that kind of disappointment, **how full of gratitude are we for 2020?**

As full as only God’s love can make us. Psalm 100 calls us again and again to rejoice in God’s love. Verse 5 echoes a refrain that occurs all through the Old Testament. The key words of that refrain have been picked up in the second half of the traditional Lutheran meal prayer. Verse 5 says, **“For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.”** That love is the reason for us to be thankful. But it’s more than it. It’s the power of God to change our hearts and make us thankful.

What do I mean? Well, God’s love never ends. Human love is rarely like that. I can sincerely love someone, and still have that love die. How many times have couples stood here at the altar of our congregation and pledged to love each other for as long as they both shall live and then within a few years gotten divorced? Were they lying when they stood here? Maybe. But more often, their love was real on their wedding day, but thousands of little acts of inattention and selfishness or one or two huge acts of unfaithfulness killed it. This past Sunday, I compared God’s grace to a mother’s love and I do think that’s a good comparison. But even a mother’s love can die. A child who takes advantage of that love or who abandons that mother when she needs him or her most can kill that love. A mother’s own selfishness can kill that love. But nothing can kill God’s love. He loves us sinners in spite of all that is wrong with us. He loves us forever.

He loves us so much that he guides all our lives. He led us to the gospel and he put faith in our hearts. And he controls all that happens to us, good and bad, so that we will spend eternity basking in his love. God loves us enough to steer us into trouble and pain when that is what our faith needs. God loves us enough to stand by us on the most terrible days of our lives. He does that even when we can’t see that he’s there. God loves us enough to hold onto us when we’re angry at him and we blame him for all that’s wrong with our lives. God loves us and he hears our prayers and answers them. God loves us and he sends family and friends and

fellow church members and pastors to help us through the most painful moments. God loves us and he often allows us to reach a moment when we can look back on our lives and see how he blessed us even in hardship.

That love reaches into our hearts and it changes us. The truth is, real gratitude to God comes from our faith. No unbeliever can ever truly feel it. Sometimes, it's hard for us to feel it. But the Holy Spirit keeps working in our hearts. And he gives us the gift of gratitude. He teaches us the spiritual skill of reviewing our blessings and seeing his love. He matures us and makes our thankfulness real, even in the hardest days. Then he opens our mouths so that we can indeed come into his courts with thanksgiving and sing his praises.

I learned that in a new and powerful way last year. I learned that even in the darkest moments and saddest times, it is still possible to sing God's praises. I learned that the hymns are still there even when we don't feel blessed because those songs of praise are a fruit of faith in God. And those hymns remind us of God's love. They touch us on a level so deep it's hard to even describe how it works. When we sing praise to God, we recount the gospel to ourselves. And God works in that. So, no matter whether 2020 or 2019 or any other year was the worst year of your life, your God still loves you. He always will. For that, give thanks, today and tomorrow and every day. Amen.