



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 apc@auburnpresbyterian.org

“Now Thank We All Our God” Joel 2:21-27; Matthew 6:25-33; 1 Timothy 2:1-7 Church Family Meeting

“Thanksgiving Inventory” DVD

Next Thursday is “Turkey Day”, with the Macy’s parade on TV that the kids can watch while mom or dad makes the big meal. Then everyone will gather at the table, eat too much, and pass out from an overdose of tryptophan, that sleep-inducing chemical hidden in the big bird. At least, that was our family tradition back in Michigan. Or, maybe your Thanksgiving tradition is gathering with neighbors at the Gold Country Fair Grounds at 11:30 for a community Thanksgiving worship service, followed by the community Thanksgiving dinner. That’s nice, too. A lot of travelers are expected to hit the roads, with gasoline prices lower this year. All of this, just to give thanks.

But it’s not always easy to give thanks. There is a lot more misery around us this year. How many of you know someone who has lost their job? How many of you know someone who has lost their house? Though the state unemployment rate is said to be 12.5%, the way that statistic is compiled does not include people who have gone back to school because they don’t have a job, or people who are working part-time because they don’t have a job, or people who have just given up looking for a job. Include all those, and the unemployment rate would be higher.

And when you’re under stress, say, from losing a job, the anxieties start to gang up on you. You start making adjustments, fast. You start to look lower on the food chain. Some hobbies have to be abandoned for now. Christmas gifts will be very different this year. Not all these changes are bad; but it often takes more creativity to negotiate each of these adjustments. And all these changes together—like any significant *single* change—brings stress.

When I served for two weeks as a student at an alcohol rehabilitation center in Western Kansas, the head Chaplain who was our instructor laid out what he called, “the world’s shortest psychological test.” Here’s a line with “fear” on one end, and “trust” on the other. He challenged each of us to pick a point on the line that represents our mental state at the moment. Where would you put your “X” this morning? It’s pretty revealing, isn’t it?

And it’s hard to give thanks when your heart is full of worry—nagging kind or the white-knuckle kind. Jesus spoke to this in our next from Matthew this morning. Open your Bibles to Matthew’s gospel, the first in the New Testament, and find chapter 6, verse 25. Listen again for God’s Word to us:

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of

the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Jesus nails it—worry kills thankfulness. If you find you are not thankful, perhaps there’s a worry eating away at your thankfulness. Makes sense, doesn’t it?

Our second lesson, from the prophet Joel, sits in his small book between Micah and Amos, toward the end of the Old Testament. Joel is one of the “minor prophets”—which is an unfortunate category, because it sounds as if they are not important. Actually, when the people came up with the label, it simply meant that there were less of their words recorded than say, Isaiah or Jeremiah.

Joel is one of several prophets God sends to His exiled people living in Babylon, in captivity. There they had been pressured to give up their faith and blend in with the dominant culture. Not many had hope any more. So Joel speaks for God—to us and those around us. He says,

Be not afraid, O land;
be glad and rejoice.

Surely the Lord has done great things.

²² Be not afraid, O wild animals,
for the open pastures are becoming green.

The trees are bearing their fruit;
the fig tree and the vine yield their riches.

²³ Be glad, O people of Zion,
rejoice in the Lord your God,
for he has given you
the autumn rains in righteousness.

He sends you abundant showers,
both autumn and spring rains, as before.

²⁴ The threshing floors will be filled with grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.

²⁵ “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—
the great locust and the young locust,
the other locusts and the locust swarm—
my great army that I sent among you.

²⁶ You will have plenty to eat, until you are full,
and you will praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has worked wonders for you;
never again will my people be shamed.

²⁷ Then you will know that I am in Israel,
that I am the Lord your God,
and that there is no other;
never again will my people be shamed.

Imagine hearing these words of hope while stuck in oppression by a foreign power, a whole generation languishing in Babylon. This is a message from God to lift up hope! And it wasn't many years before God did exactly what Joel said He would do.

Who around you needs a “faith lift”? Who needs a “shot of hope”? Remember the three most important verses in the Bible—Genesis 12:1-3: “Blessed to be a blessing.” So especially in this holiday season—Thanksgiving, Christmas—how might you BE a blessing to someone who really could use some good news? You see, we have to BE good news, before we can speak the Good News about Jesus. And people who have been knocked down are the ones who could most use the good news you could BE, and then SAY.

Our third text today, from Paul's first letter to Timothy, contains this thought and more. First Timothy 2:1-7—God speaking to us: I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—² for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³ This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time. ⁷ And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles.

God wants everyone to be saved, to know Jesus –and “knowledge” does not mean “intellectual assent”, but personal experience”, right?! God blesses, God has always wanted to bless ALL—just as Genesis 12 says it—from the beginning. And just as God chose Abraham to carry the blessing of knowing Him to all, so we who are daughters and sons of Abraham by faith are to be that blessing to others, too—not only to the Jews (the direct descendants of Abraham) but also to the Gentiles (everyone else).

When the Plymouth Colony pilgrims gave thanks on that first Thanksgiving Day in 1621, they thanked God for bringing them through a terrible winter to a year when crops were plentiful. We don't have a reliable record of the prayers that were raised that day, but the prayers certainly should have included thanks to God for the Native American “savages” who helped them survive that terrible winter the year before when their crops had failed. The pilgrims knew well that they had been blessed. One tradition has it that they put but a few grains of dried corn on their plates at the start of that thanksgiving meal, to vividly remind them of how hard it had been, just one year before.

Their primary thanks to God was for survival. That was raw and recent experience; none would forget it. For most of us—and we can give thanks for this -- survival is not a present emotional issue. We, like the Pilgrims, are in this position because of others, and others before them. We give thanks for the unmerited favor that allows us to put food on our table.

But in the light of God's Word to us this morning, can we elevate our experience of God even higher in our thanks? Can we say, like Paul wrote to his friends at Philippi when he suspected his life would soon be taken from him, "For me, to live is Christ now, and if I die, it's a win—I don't even know which to choose"? (Philippians 1:21-22, paraphrased) And if we cannot yet say that, can we feel that gap--that lack of felt connection with God--so personally that it makes us sore with desire for more of God?

When you have come into the love of God so fully, life becomes simple. It's like when you were "in love" for the first time: you start seeing reminders of your girlfriend or boyfriend everywhere you look; every conversation seems as though it leans toward her or him. When you love God, the Bible seems to effortlessly point to the One you love, on every page. You start to grasp how great God's grace has been long before you knew it. You look back and see a rolling tide of God's grace carrying you along, like a wave carries a surfer.

Play with that for a moment. A surfer has to learn to ride a wave. She has to buy a board, or make one. Especially at first, it's a lot of work, with many failures. But she keeps at it, powered by her vision of the rush of mastering the movement, harnessing the power of the wave. But whether she gets it or not, for all her trial and error--learning to balance, muscle memory—it's all built on top of the wave. It's all grace—even her intelligence to solve the problem, even her physical health and strength to get up on the board. It's all God. If she turns her focus to God-in-that-moment, everything changes. She knows she surfs by the grace of God, and sometimes, she can even sense God's pleasure in her pleasure.

If your love for God becomes such a present experience, you want to share it. You want to bless others with that. You wish, you actively crave, that present experience of God for them.

Sure, if they are hungry, you want to feed them. You bet, if they don't have a job, you help them through (financially, perhaps with others helping too, and certainly emotionally by helping them take physical stress breaks). But you do those things so that they can soon enough get beyond those immediate and pressing needs to find "the real gold" of life. Then with hearts and hands and voices, we thank the God we know is blessing us just with His presence, which we feel through His Holy Spirit, and we find to be true in any circumstance.

Then the worry fades, and we savor the Savior. We have hope beyond hope. We are lifted out of our current privation into abundant hope that the world cannot understand. Thanksgiving becomes thanks-living. Blessing others with the blessings of God becomes as natural as breathing. All our resources can be put into play. We have a focus, a purpose for life, and we feel God's pleasure. And so do those whom we bless with God's blessing. Life becomes simple, simply thanks-living.

Here's what I'd encourage you to do this Thanksgiving season. First, if you are under a lot of stress from setbacks in your life, start focusing on *this moment*. Are you alive? That's a good thing. Give thanks. Did you eat today? Give thanks. Do you have a roof over your head today? Give thanks. Are your kids learning, in school and out of school? Give thanks. Do you

have others in your life who care for you? Thank God! If you're dealing with a lot of stress, focus on the present moment. One day at a time, *even one moment at a time*, give thanks for the present. That's the first thing to try this season.

Second, as you give thanks for these things, turn to God fully. Put aside anything else for just a moment, even these things for which you've just thanked him. Focus on the Giver, not just the gift. It may be easier to close your eyes and picture Jesus, to bring Jesus in. And just rest in His presence.

In that moment with God, choose to trust Him, deep in your gut. Now take a vivid picture of your meeting with God . . . Put it up on the refrigerator of your mind. . . Look at it every morning, and carry that trust forward to plant it like a flag, to claim that new day in trust of God.

And third, if you are without stress or worry this year, give thanks for that, too. Likewise, put yourself fully in God's presence. And filled with God's blessing of love, ask God for whom to bless, and how. Listen, look, feel around for what God tells, shows, nudges you. . . .

This is Happy Thanks-Living!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on November 22, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]