

Brentview Baptist Church
'A Star Gazers View'
Stories of Impact



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Thanksgiving is one of my favorite weekends, for over the years it has been full of many different memories. For example it was on a Thanksgiving weekend that I drove the 9 hours from Bible School to bring Kathy home to introduce her to my family. As we drew nearer to Grand Cache (where my parents were living) I watched Kathy getting more and more nervous. And as I began to think of the kind of tease my dad could be, my nervousness began to grow as well. Finally we arrived. We walked into the house, made our introductions and that is when I saw this smirk appear on my dad's mouth, at that moment I knew we were in trouble. Within minutes of meeting Kathy my dad said 'I have a wedding on Saturday, for 50 cents I can do another wedding you know'. Who needs enemies when you have relatives like my dad, you should know that next Christmas, included in my Christmas card from Kathy I found 49 cents from her. It only took me another 2 years to raise the extra penny.

Thanksgiving can be a great holiday weekend, but most of us know from experience, sometimes we have to wrestle our way to being thankful. Maybe you have seen the Peanuts Cartoon where on Thanksgiving Charlie Brown brings Snoopy a bowl of dog food and says 'Here you are Snoopy, "Happy Thanksgiving"'. The next frame shows Snoopy in a snit because everyone else in the family is having Turkey for dinner. So he lies on his dog house and mutters how about that. Everyone is eating turkey today, but just because I'm a dog all I get is dog food". The finale frame shows him, having an 'ah ha moment' when he adds 'of course, it could be worse, I could have been born a turkey!'

There are times when our happiness is directly related to our point of view. It is fair to say that if you look around there is always something we can be thankful for. But let's be realistic, every Thanksgiving doesn't fall on a time when we feel extra thankful for where we are in life. This last week we just heard that Ken VanderMeulen (Senior Pastor of our sister church Thorn hill Baptist) had to quit preaching last Sunday because he was slurring his words. So he went to the hospital and found out that he has a brain tumor). Thanksgiving will have this shadow over it this year for their family and to be honest, some of you who are here this morning will have a shadow over your Thanksgiving celebrations as well due to some things you may be walking through in your life. As I was thinking about this, a verse came to mind that I think will help all of us, no matter where we are in our life situations be able to lean into our God give thanks.

(Psalm 119:57-62) I have this picture of this man and a woman rising out of their bed around midnight for sleep seems to be evading them. The person walks toward the window, looks up at the starry sky and as they look at the big dipper, the mass of twinkling stars across the sky something happens within them. They stop in the stillness of the night and pray 'Lord, I know that there is 2 of us here, you and I and in this stillness, in this quiet because of what you have done in my life.

Who you have been to me here at midnight, I choose to trust and I want to stop and out of a joyful heart I want to thank you for your many blessings, for being so very good to me". They then climb back into bed and with new hope fall back to sleep.

It is a picture of a sacred moment; one of those moments where God shows up and despite what is going on around you, hope flows back into your being, because somehow in that moment the God of the Universe came close. It is one of those moments which you will never forget and draws you into a place of thankfulness. As I thought about this picture I found myself asking, what kind of situation would lead to this kind of meeting which led to that type of thankfulness? And 3 came to mind:

1. Thanksgiving in the Midst of Joy

We all know from experience that it is easiest to thank the Lord when things are going well. If you were here last week you will remember that we looked at the story of David as he took on 'his giant' and watched as he was able to be a part of a miracle as Goliath the 9'9" giant fell to the ground. I'll bet that if Thanksgiving Sunday happened, that next week David would have had no problem being thankful for all God had done for him, especially thankful that he would still be alive enough to make it to church. In David's case we know that when he was thankful, he was really thankful. If you turn over to (1 Chronicles 15) you will find this great story of when the Ark of the Covenant was moved back to Jerusalem.

The Ark was seen as the place where God placed his feet and so if the Ark was moving back into Jerusalem it meant God was about to set up his dwelling right in the midst of their holy city and this idea thrilled David. So the closer the Ark came to the city the more excited David became until we read in (1 Chronicles 15:1, 3, 16, 25-29). As the Ark came closer to Jerusalem, every 6 feet they would stop and make a sacrifice, the choir director lead the choir, David took off his kingly garments, which left him wearing his ephod (like his under tunic) and joined in with the other dancers with abandon and danced the ark into the city. This may not sound very Baptist but it is Wonderful and Godly. For, he was so overcome with joy that he was willing to look foolish in expressing that joy. And he didn't care; he wanted everyone to know how grateful he was for the Lord's goodness in his life.

When I thought of a modern day parallel to David's actions, that crazy moment on Oprah came to mind, as Tom Cruise jumped on the couch to show how excited he was that Katie Holmes had said yes to his marriage proposal. Now while I won't argue that his medication may have needed to be increased. It was interesting to see that at 43; having being married 2 times before his experience with 'truly being in love' caused him to abandon his normal way of acting. David in this passage was so overwhelmed with the goodness of God in his life that he just couldn't help express his thankfulness to all those around him. So he danced, he sang, he shouted for all to hear, that God was so good he was so good to me.

I mention this because often we are like the Vermont farmer who was sitting on his porch with his wife of 42 years. And was so overcome with how precious she was to him that he said 'wife, you've been such a wonderful woman to me that there are times I can hardly keep from telling you how I feel'. Internally, we are struck with how good God has been to us and then like the 10 lepers in the New Testament who were healed by Jesus, we can get so caught up in enjoying the good things God has given us that we fail to stop and say thank you to him. Listen to David's words: (Psalm 89:1; 98:1; 92:1, 2)

On September 8, 1860 a ship named the Lady Elgin was steaming across Lake Michigan when one of the greatest sea tragedies in Canadian history happened. That morning in the midst of a dense fog she was struck by another vessel causing over 400 passengers to end up in the freezing water. That night over 300 people drowned. More would have drowned except for the valiant effort of a few brave people. One of these was a young man named Edward Spenser who swam out to the ship 17 times, bringing 17 people back to safety on the shore. For his effort he was declared a national hero. A number of years later a reporter wondered what had happened to this brave man. Only to find out that he was in Institute, for those struggling with mental issues. When he was asked how he had ended up there, he made 2 comments, the first was that the memories of that day still haunted him as he wondered if he could have saved more people, secondly he was shaken by the fact that not one of the 17 people he had saved had ever said thank you for what he had done for them. And so he wondered if what he had done was worth it.

I was on Skype with Vicki Park last week, who is serving near Bangalore in India for 5 weeks, and she said that she has been overwhelmed by how they worship with abandon. She was telling me of folks who have become Christians from a Hindu background and lost everything, including family, in order to follow Jesus. She says it has caused her to rethink how she needs to worship her God who has been so good to her. So like in the passage we began with, the next time you stare at the night sky or as you sit around the table today stop and make a list of the many good things God has given you. And like the old hymn says Count your many blessings, name them one by one. It will surprise you what the Lord has done. Having seen what he has done take's time to say thank you, for how good God has been to you.

2. Thanksgiving in the Midst of Trouble

Go back to (Psalm 119:62) maybe the man and women that I began speaking about, were having troubles sleeping because there was an issue, maybe an illness, a worry over one of their children or maybe it was concerning their finances or their future. But it had kept them awake. And so, unable to sleep they stand and stare at the night sky and in the stillness of God came and stood close. If you study David's life you will know that David's life wasn't always easy either. It wasn't that long after David slew the giant, not long after he had heard the crowds yelling that under General David's leadership 'the armies had killed there 10's of 1000's, that things went sour. And Saul in a fit of anger tries 2xs to pin him to the wall with his spear. (1 Samuel 18:8-12) we find David hiding in a cave (The Cave of Adullam) wet, alone and afraid for his life. Probably, wondering what had just happened, feeling his dreams for the future were dead, possibly wondering where God was, and that life was a cruel joke. (1 Samuel 22:1)

If we are honest, we have all clocked some time in various caves in our lives haven't we? And I know that some of you feel just like David, and your head is spinning with where you find yourself right now. Because you never thought you would be in the situation you find yourself in today. It isn't that you have never seen God at work in your life. Actually, the cave David was hiding in, was only a few miles away from the valley where he had killed Goliath (a place of victory), that happened not that long ago. But, that doesn't mean that as in his case, it isn't a Rainy Day in Judea for you today. Then someone says, it is the Thanksgiving weekend, what are you thankful for? You try to appear happy for the sake of others, but deep inside you wish the weekend would just go away. As I read David's story, and as I picture him sitting at the cave entrance looking up at the star filled night sky, I see him taking 3 positions that may help you on your journey on this Thanksgiving Day.

1. We find him on his Face: Turn to (Psalm 142:1-7). If you have a bible that has headings, look at where it says this passage was written. It says it was written in the cave. Which cave? Probably the Cave of Adullam, and it is one of the lowest times of his life. (Psalm 142:1-7). I'll bet he laid their flat on his face, laying out his situation as he saw it to the Lord. Pouring out his heart as the tears flowed. Probably having to stop a number of times to pull himself back together, and as he wrote he didn't pretend that things were better than they were and he lifted his shaky voice to the Lord and expressed the pain of his heart. Something happened half way through his prayer. Did you see it? Verse 4 he says, 'I feel all alone' and then vs. 5 he says "I cried to you O Lord, I say you are my refuge..." There in the cave as he looked at the starry night sky he realized that he wasn't alone in the cave. While his situation hadn't changed, in some way everything had changed, for he realized that whatever the future may bring he would not have to face it alone. For the first time in days, hope started to flow back into his life.

All of us know that in life stuff happens. Let me say this gently, one of the reasons we need to stay connected to faith community is that God never wants us to have to be in the cave by ourselves. That is why we need to stay regularly connected to Jesus and to a Christian community of those who know Jesus and will be there to sit with you in the cave in those tough times. I tell you this because I know from experience, when stuff happens you want to be certain that you haven't pushed God or Christian friends out of your life. For nothing is lonelier than being in the cave alone. But what David is saying is that, the good news is when he looked around He found God was with him in the cave. If you look at (1 Samuel 22:1) you will find that cave experience actually pulled his family closer together. Remember that when you fall flat on your face in the cave of despair, God is right there beside you.

2. We find him on his Knees: Flip back to (Psalm 57) and read the heading again, it is another Psalm written in the cave. That tells me that some cave's (problems we face) aren't fixed in a couple easy steps and with one quick Hail Mary prayer. That God will be with us even during those situations which like cancer treatment, marriage troubles, financial setbacks etc. for the long haul. (Psalm 57:1-4) What is he doing? He is looking back to the key thing we learned last week as David took on Goliath. Actually I think David is bringing to mind what he already knows, but had lost hold of, during this last struggle. That is "That the battle is the Lord's".

The reason we need to be reminded about this is that because in the Cave of Despair, fear, discouragement or panic, we can't see an actual giant, we forget to apply the same strategy that we would use as we take on the visible giant. We forget that the answer is still the same that we need to turn over our situation, our depression, our mid-life turmoil or our illness to the Lord. Quit trying to think reason or intellectually muddle our way through it. Instead place it and ourselves in the Lord's hands, and remind ourselves that the battle is the Lord's. Maybe part of your thanksgiving needs to be in your mind, to pass your situation, hand over your situation to the Lord and then thank him for carrying it for and with you, then to keep remembering that the battle is the Lord's.

3. We find him on his Way: (1 Samuel 22:5) did you catch what it just said. It says that the cave of Despair had turned into a place that felt like a stronghold to him. That over time this place that was near to the entrance of the cave, where he could look up and see the stars which represented the power of God. Became a place where he could look around and feel the presence of God. Become a precious and sacred place where even in the middle of the tough stuff he felt the strength of God and it became a place where strength could be drawn from. That the very thing and place he thought would destroy him became a place where he and God fought the battle together, it become a time of great blessing.

I have heard people talk about an illness, a loss or a struggle using these very same words. As they left the cave they left deeper, fuller more God focused and family/world impacting. They would tell you that their journey was a gift not a curse. That is the promise of this passage.

3. Thanksgiving in the Midst of Sorrow

I also know that this Thanksgiving, around the table some of you will find an empty chair today. And, that you will face the perplexity of celebrating the goodness of God, in the midst of a loss which leave's a huge hole in your life. I also know that often joy and loss sit very close together. You saw an example of this, this morning as Lonnie and Valerie dedicated their Simeon to the Lord, 2 years to the day their precious baby Lucy passed from this life to the next. Let me tell you a story that may help put thanksgiving and sorrow in perspective.

Many of us grew up singing 'Now Thank we all, our God' most Thanksgivings. I have always thought that it was written during a happy time in some churches life. Did you know that it was written in a little town in Germany called Eilenburg in 1637? Eillenburg was a Luthern town which lay right between the middle of where a war was being raged. Because of this, the city was captured and lost 3 times by the enemy. During the battle the city was shelled, food was very scarce and disease ran rampant. By 1637 many had fled. During the final siege 2 of the remaining 3 Pastors were killed, leaving only Pastor Martin Rinkart. At that time there were over ten's of 1000's of refuges that were starving. So Pastor Rinkart remortgaged his house to buy food for the starving. In the space of a few months he preformed 4,480 funerals, including the funerals of his wife and all his children. Then on behalf of the town, tried to arrange a peace treaty with the Swedish commander, who refused any mercy.

So they met in the broken down church and he said "Come we can find no mercy with men, let us take refuge in God". In that hopeless situation they fell on their knees in prayer. That very next day the Swedish commander relented and his army left. The next week Rinkart held a service of thanksgiving for God's care in their lives, he wrote the words we sing for that occasion. Remember, he wrote in the midst of his own personal loss to be sung by people who had also experience loss. Listen to the words "Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in Whom the world rejoices; Who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way. With countless gifts of love and still is our today'. You can only write "and still is ours today" if in the cave of despair you looked around and saw that you weren't alone. Because of that you realized that the battle is still the Lords and for that you wanted to thank him.

Let me end with (Psalm 119:62) 'At midnight I rise to give you thanks'. Kathy and I have a trailer that sits in the middle of the trees and for some reason every night I am drawn to make my way outside and simply sit and stare at the stars. Maybe this verse explains why I am drawn to stare heavenward. I am pulled to looked heaven word and as I do I am overwhelmed by the vastness and the wonder of space. Then the nearness of my God, because of that I end up giving thanks for his goodness in my life, for his nearness in my cave situations. That He, ever powerful and ever near during my times of celebration and sorrow. That is why I, like pastor Rinkart are drawn to sing "Now thank we now our God".