

SERMON: Grateful, Joyful, Hopeful

TEXT: Psalm 16

“Now, before we eat, let’s all go around the table and say what we’re thankful for. Billy, what are you thankful for? *“No school.”* How about you, Sally? *“Sleeping in.”* Jimmy? *Do we really have to do this?* Yes, Jimmy. *Come back to me.* Then let’s hear from Patricia. *Black Friday sales. I’m leaving for the mall at midnight.* Ok, Jimmy, back to you. *Can we turn on the TV? I wanna watch the game.*

Does any of this sound familiar? At my house it always seemed like a lovely thing to do until we actually did it. Then it sounded a lot like what you just heard. In my view, people from around age 10 to, let’s say, age 60, think this is a worn out tradition – hokey or sappy, at best; forced and insincere at worst. Some around the table may roll their eyes or groan inwardly, as they wrack their brains to come up with a unique, yet believable answer. Somehow, it’s never as thoughtful and meaningful as you hoped it would be.

This Thanksgiving, however, seems especially important in light of the long list of terrible things happening in our country and in our world. Storms and fires are getting more severe and more devastating. Political disagreements are

destroying relationships. There have been more mass shootings this year in our country than ever. Children are shot in school, young people are shot while dancing and enjoying music. People of all ages are shot while going to church or synagogue or mosque. Watching the news is enough to drive a person into depression and despair. Even a recent story about kindness and generosity – where a young couple helped a homeless man – turned out to be a hoax.

One theologian wrote about how she and her family “play a game with the local and national news programming. We list all of the things we’re told to be afraid of in a 30-minute span. Try it,” she writes. “The average is 6-8 per broadcast and it ranges from races of persons, to scary multi-national terror groups, to *the dangers of sunscreen*. It is my way of showing my children just how much of the media is designed to keep them fearful. It is an inoculation of sorts because clearly, fear sells.” (Beth L. Tanner, *Commentary on Psalm 16*, www.workingpreacher.org, November 18, 2018)

Years ago I preached a sermon about what motivates us to be good Christians, and I said that fear of eternal damnation is *not* a good motivator. A young man who seldom attended church approached me afterward to tell me I was

wrong. These many years later, I think perhaps I was wrong. We seem to be letting fear control our decisions and our actions.

Even in the church, we're afraid that our congregation is dying out, that our losses continue to be greater than our gains. Or we fear that we won't have the money to continue doing ministry or even maintain our building for the future. We fear that our precious children and young people will grow up and grow away from the church family that has nurtured them in the faith. We fear that we're in a downward spiral and we don't know how to stop it.

The passage we read from the Gospel of Mark seems particularly pointed to our day and time. Jesus is teaching the disciples about the end time, the apocalypse, saying, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, *I am he!* and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines."

Wars, earthquakes, famines. Our fear is well-founded.

And yet, what Jesus says next may have you doing a double-take: “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” Birth pangs? Sounded like doomsday to me! But no. Jesus is reminding us that new life is being created even in the midst of death and destruction. Even when we feel as though the earth is crumbling around us, if we listen closely, we might hear a tiny heartbeat. The end ushers in a new beginning. And the pain of death could also be a pang of birth.

Psalm 16 shares a much more pointed message of hope. I’d like to read it to you again, but this time from a version called, The Voice:

Protect me, God, for the only safety I know
is found in the moments I seek You.

² I told You, Eternal One, “You are my Lord,
for the only good I know in this world is found in You alone.”

³ The beauty of faith-filled people encompasses me.
They are true, and my heart is thrilled beyond measure.

⁴ *All the while* the despair of many, who abandoned Your goodness
for *the empty promises of false gods*, increases day by day.
I refuse to pour out blood offerings, to utter their names from my lips.

⁵ You, Eternal One, are my sustenance and my *life-giving* cup.
In that cup, You hold my future and my eternal riches.

⁶ My home is surrounded in beauty;
You have gifted me with abundance and a rich legacy.

⁷ I will bless the Eternal, whose wise teaching orchestrates my days
and centers my mind at night.

⁸ He is ever present with me; *at all times He goes before me.*
I will not live in fear *or abandon my calling*
because He stands at my right hand.

⁹ *This is a good life*—my heart is glad,
my soul is full of joy, and my body is at rest.
Who could want for more?

¹⁰ You will not abandon me to experience death and the grave
or leave me to rot alone.

¹¹ *Instead,* You direct me on the path that leads to *a beautiful life.*
As I walk with You, the pleasures are never-ending,
and I know true joy *and contentment.*

This Psalm is a beautiful and crucial reminder that it is God who gives us life, who holds our future, who provides abundance, who gives true pleasures, true joy and contentment. No matter what is going on around us, we can be GRATEFUL, JOYFUL, AND HOPEFUL because of God's presence and provision.

There's a kind of litany that is familiar among many ministers and Christians I know. You may be aware of it, too. During a conversation around either lamenting or rejoicing, one person may proclaim to the other, *God is good*. Then the other responds, *all the time*. The first person then turns it around, proclaiming, *all the time*, and the other responds, *God is good*.

When we remember God's faithfulness to creation since the beginning of time, we know that there is goodness to be found, even if it's only a knot to hang on to at the end of your rope.

Mr. Rogers said to look for the helpers. "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

During this season of stewardship, we have been telling the story behind the budget. Often those four or five digit numbers can be daunting; they seem to set before us an unreachable goal. While the costs are significant – even scary at times – the ministry that those costs represent, the goals that we have for the future of God's church are PRICELESS. The numbers represent who we are and how we

are striving to be among the helpers in our world. This is where our focus must be, on our ministry and mission and on God's call.

Especially in a time of struggle and fear, God calls us to be GRATEFUL, JOYFUL, AND HOPEFUL – not because of our circumstances, but in spite of our circumstances. Because God is our refuge. Because God is the source of all goodness. Because we have a goodly heritage. Because God gives us counsel. Because God shows us the path of life. Because God is always present. And in God's presence there is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.

Let us be GRATEFUL, JOYFUL, AND HOPEFUL... to the glory of God!

Amen.