

I was out hiking last Friday with some friends, and I was amazed at the beauty that surrounded us: the vibrant array of bold colors dressing the trees, the crunchiness of the leaves that had already fallen and laid beneath our feet, the crispness of the air, the bright blue sky. One of my friends yelled, "Stop! You've got to see this and thank God for God's breathtaking creation!" So we all stopped to remember and give thanks to God. I wanted to burst out in song, singing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow...", but I said the words out loud instead. As Thanksgiving draws near, many of us are thinking about what we're thankful for — taking time to consider who is the Source of our life and all things. In today's psalm we're reminded to thank God for what God has done. I realize that this may seem like an obligatory Thanksgiving message, and it is and yet I also hope and pray that this is a message that we live out each day of the year. "The Hebrew name for the book of Psalms is 'Praises,' and just as a side note, the Hebrew root involved is used in the invitation *hallelu-yah*, which means 'Praise the Lord'" (*The CEB Study Bible*). Psalm 103 is a song of praise that both begins and ends with invitations to praise (vv. 1-2, 20-22). Thanksgiving, if there is to be any at all, must begin and end with God. That's right...Thanksgiving begins not with our success and not even with ourselves; **it begins with God. But God...**In today's psalm, the object of the praise is the Lord. The psalmist begins shouting praise and awe from the center- the deepest well of their being. Before turning to God's word for us this day, let us pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in Psalm 103. **READ.**
Psalm 103:1-8.

Psalm 103, a hymn of praise, is one of the most popular of the psalms. You may recognize the words of these first eight verses in the lyrics of songs such as “Bless The Lord” in the musical, *Godspell*, or in Matt Redman’s song, “10,000 Reasons.” Or I also hear it in Travis Greene’s song, “Thank You For Being God” or in Maverick City Music’s song “I Thank God.” The outburst of praise and awe here is greatly connected to the past deeds of God. The psalmist remembers. The opening calls the self and all the people in the congregation to bless God by remembering – not forgetting - the blessings God has given to make life possible. All of God’s deeds, described here as the reasons why the Lord should be praised, are remembered. The psalmist includes such justifications and goes into great detail about what God has done for the psalmist’s soul or life. I have a friend who doesn’t call that moment we take before consuming a meal a “blessing.” She calls it “Grace” or “Saying Thanks.” The reason she doesn’t say the word “blessing” is that she needs to remember that God is the one who blesses our food. Saying thanks is a recognition that the food “is not ours to begin with, but loaned to us. Therefore, we thank God for providing it. Yes, it might seem like semantics; however, I wonder if she may be on to something-something that may help us to remember to stop what we’re doing- even in the midst of a storm in our lives- and praise God...to remember what God has done, is doing and will do in our lives...and to give thanks. This reminds me of an article I read some years ago from Anne Lamott about saying grace over a meal. Lamott, a best-selling author, often writes books that explore how individuals can transform their lives — how one moves from being troubled to feeling whole. In Lamott's case, she

suffered from alcoholism and drug abuse; after hitting rock bottom, she found her faith. She writes, “We didn’t say grace when I was growing up because my parents were atheists. Instead, my parents raised glasses of wine to the chef: Cheers. Dig in. But I had a terrible secret, which was that I believed in God, a divine presence who heard me when I prayed, who stayed close to me in the dark. So at six years old I began to infiltrate religious families like a spy—Mata Hari in plaid sneakers. One of my best friends was a Catholic girl. Her boisterous family bowed its collective head and said, “Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts...” I was so hungry for these words; it was like a cool breeze, a polite thank-you note to God, the silky magnetic energy of gratitude. I still love that line” (<https://parade.com/121696/annelamott/121111-anne-lamott-counting-our-blessings/>).

In preparing for today’s sermon I discovered that it was an ancient practice to thank God for the food not just at the beginning of the meal but also at the end. Maybe we should reinstate this practice in our daily lives? Afterall, **it is good to give thanks... AND EQUALLY important to know what we give thanks for.** We are thankful not only for God’s constancy and for God being God, but, if we are truly to be part of the process of reconciling with one another, we are most thankful that with God we are given a second chance (Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms*). We give thanks to the *one who forgives our iniquity and heals all our diseases- who delivers us from the pit- from death.*

That all sounds really good but sometimes it is hard to be thankful when your own life is in the dumps- when things aren't going your way. Sometimes the loneliness of the holidays can be difficult. And not all people are simply delighted with their family while others don't have family. And right or wrong the truth is that sometimes we feel our blessings are in short supply. We're sick in bed while others are getting out and about. We're short on cash while others are living high off the hog. Loss and sadness can be magnified by the cheer of others, especially around the holidays. On occasion laughter can cut like a knife, and other times it can soothe like the balm of Gilead. This time of year, it can be hard to know the right thing to say (Trish Gwinn). It's ok to complain sometimes. That's real. And we also have to remember to give thanks. Although gratitude is complicated, I believe it is a spiritual discipline. Often, practicing gratitude isn't an activity that we make time for nor that we feel like doing. Sometimes it can even feel like a chore. And we're more than capable of practicing gratitude, even in the midst of the storms and valleys of life, and it helps us to shift our mindset- to remember God's faithfulness in our lives. Winnie the Pooh's friend, Piglet, "noticed that even though he had a very small heart, it could hold a rather large amount of gratitude" (A. A. Milne).

Gratitude is absolutely central to faith. In all things, we are to give thanks. Yet, we forget to thank God for being God. We forget to thank God for waking us up each day. We forget to thank God for the gift of new life. Nothing turns us into bitter, selfish, dissatisfied people more quickly than an ungrateful heart. And nothing will do more to restore

contentment and the joy of our salvation than a true spirit of thankfulness. One of the moments that causes us to understand this at a new level is when you look at the root word for gratitude in both Greek (kharis) and in Latin (gratia) is grace. It's also the root word for gifts. Gratitude, grace and gifts are then utterly indistinguishable. These words forms the basis of Christian theology. "Grace. That's the whole story. That's everything (Diana Butler Bass' grandmother, *Grateful*). The central theme of today's psalm is "Amazing Grace." Our response to God's grace is gratitude. The flow of grace is from God. Faith is the ability to trust and to live in that vision of grace. Grace flows from the deepest abundance of God. Sometimes it's hard to see because things in our lives obscure this reality of gifts and grace. Yet, scripture tells us "in" all things, give thanks. Not "for" all things. The first words of our lives should always be "thank you," or "I'm so grateful." If the first words are "thank you," then the last words are also "thank you." "Gratitude is the capacity to recognize the abundance of gifts that surrounds us. Gratitude is the primary moral framework of life in God" (Diana Butler Bass, www.dianabutlerbass.com). And did you know that taking time to practice gratitude can improve physical and psychological well-being (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/benefits-of-saying-grace_n_6200202)?!

Isn't it strange how God invites us to stop, remember and give thanks?! I walked into Pat's office the other day stressing about all that is before us. If you don't know Pat Parker, she is the Assistant Director here at Triune and runs this place, with God's help. She looked at me, shook her

head and said, “I hear you, and you know what? We’ve got to thank God for God being God. Have you done that lately?” She asked this because she had just had this conversation with another person, and they had held each other accountable with this question, and she had remembered to thank God as well. I wasn’t shamed nor did I feel guilt...I remembered, and I felt my shoulders relax some, as I nodded in agreement. But God...! Triune is because of God! We are because of God! Thank you, God, for waking us up this morning! Thank you for drawing people to this church to donate coats and serve food and volunteer their time and give art supplies and share Christ’s love! Hallelujah! How do you live as those who worship a God abounding in steadfast love?

I find it interesting that Thanksgiving Day is not very far away from Advent and Christmas. In Thanksgiving we look back and remember and give thanks. In Advent we look forward to the coming again of our second chance: the God who forgives, who heals, who redeems, who crowns, who satisfies, who renews. This psalm is a celebration and thanksgiving of God’s gracious and steadfast love- of all the things God does to promote well-being. May we, too, praise God for God’s grace, mercy, and love showered upon God’s people, as the psalmist describes. Those who sing this psalm- this song of praise- “know themselves to be forgiven sinners. They do not receive steadfast love because they fear the Lord; they fear the Lord because they have been forgiven. This psalm is a marvelous way to remember, and there is nothing more important for sinners to remember in life and in death than the

sovereignty of divine grace” (James L. Mayes, *Interpretation: Psalms*). So I urge you my friends, whether your heart is full of laughter or full of tears – whatever the case may be, may we all **give thanks to God** and praise God no matter- out of our songs and our struggles, out of our griefs and our triumphs- because we thank God that God is God and we are not. We are God’s beloved children so let us join with the psalmist who says, “Bless the Lord O my soul & all that is within me, bless God’s holy name. Bless the Lord O my soul & forget not all God’s blessings” (vv.1-2). Hallelujah! Thanks be to God! Amen.