

“Giving Thanks”
Psalm 30
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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For the last three months or so we have been traveling through the Old Testament, following the story of God’s covenant people chosen to be a blessing for the whole world. Though God’s people faced many challenges - slavery in Egypt, years wandering in the wilderness, and the ups and downs of having kings ruling over them - one thing remained constant, the steadfast love and loyalty of their God. There are some Christian denominations who only pay attention to the books of the New Testament, thinking that the stories of Jesus are somehow more important than those of the Hebrew scriptures. Our Presbyterian/ Reformed tradition believes that the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ is the same God we meet in the Old Testament, and for us to fully embrace who this God is, we must know the stories of both the old and the new covenants.

Today we come to the last in our series covering the Hebrew scriptures, turning to Psalm 30, a psalm of thanksgiving. The psalms have been called the hymnbook of the Bible - they contain beautiful and honest words we believe were read and sung by the Hebrew people. Because of my lack of musical abilities, I invite you to join me in reading (not singing!) these verses together, using the words printed in your bulletin insert. Let us turn now to God’s Word:

Psalm 30 *(New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)*

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up and did not let my foes rejoice over me.
O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me.
O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

As for me, I said in my prosperity, “I shall never be moved.”

By your favor, O LORD, you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face; I was dismayed.

To you, O LORD, I cried, and to the LORD I made supplication:

“What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit?

Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?

Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me! O LORD, be my helper!”

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever,

This is the time of the year where our thoughts turn towards gratitude and thanksgiving. It's also the time when we think about turkey and stuffing, sweet potato casseroles and pumpkin pie - family and friends get together and yes, there's a lot of football on TV, too! I've been thinking a lot about thanksgiving and gratitude these last several weeks, and in my daily commute I have listened to an interesting podcast that has given me some food for thought. A [recent Hidden Brain episode](#) from NPR (*"The Enemies of Gratitude"*) explores why being thankful does not always come naturally to us. Objectively, everyone in this sanctuary today has many reasons to be thankful. For example, if you live in a household with at least \$30,000/year, your income is 10 times the global median and in the top 5% of incomes worldwide. "And if you are older than 35, congratulations. For much of human history, many people died before they were 30." But though we all have many reasons to be grateful, we have a tendency to turn inward on our own struggles and fail to look at the bigger picture. Our own struggles, problems and anxieties can become all-consuming, and when our focus is there, other people's troubles are much harder to notice than our own. And when we do look outside ourselves, it is so easy to compare ourselves to others. I may have taken a vacation, but it's nothing like the one my neighbor just took. I might be driving a new car, but my friend's car is so much better! President Theodore Roosevelt once wrote, "Comparison is the thief of joy." I can't feel thankful for what I have if I think you have more than I do (Shankar Vedantam, [Hidden Brain](#)). Social media only amplifies the tendency for the human heart to compare our lives with others, and to believe that others have it much easier or better than we do.

In the [Hidden Brain](#) podcast social scientist Thomas Gilovich named another obstacle for practicing gratitude - he called it the tendency we have to adapt to our situation. He puts it like this: "Good things happen to you and you say, 'Oh, I'm going to appreciate this forever. I'm never going to sweat the small stuff again.' Fast forward a few months and the small stuff is still driving you nuts and you get mad at people in traffic... You worry about all these tiny things that you swore you would never do" ([Hidden Brain](#)). Because of our sinful nature we are lulled into complacency - we forget all the reasons we have to be grateful for simple things like waking up in the morning, for the beauty we see all around us in nature, for the gift of life itself.

When we turn to today's scripture, we see some of the same dynamics coming into play. The psalmist refers to a time of being comfortable - when life was going well and everything was smooth sailing. "As for me, I said in my prosperity, 'I shall never be moved.' By your favor, O Lord, you established me as a strong mountain..." (30.6-7a). We all may be able to remember times like these, where everything seemed to be going right, and we might have even felt like a strong mountain, too. But though we don't know exactly what happens, the psalmist takes a fall into the pit. Whether it was an illness or some other personal challenge or conflict, we don't know exactly what happened - but it is not good. But instead of this being the focus of the psalm, the emphasis is on praise and thanksgiving for God's action. "I will lift you up, O Lord, for you have drawn me up and did not let my foes rejoice over me... I cried to you for help, and you healed me. You brought up my soul from the land of the dead, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit" (30.1-3). Such praise and thanksgiving are the

first and last words of this song - the psalmist wants us to know that giving thanks is not just a one time deal for getting out of a bind. No, giving thanks is a lifetime practice! "O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever."

But that's easier said than done, right? How many parents or grandparents have been guilty of saying to the kids, "You know, you really should be more grateful! You should always remember to say 'Thank you!'" I know that includes me! But as people of faith, thanksgiving and gratitude are things we can't produce on our own, and they are things that cannot be manufactured by guilt. ***In light of experiencing the grace and good news of God's saving love, we are called simply to make a response - a free response that comes from the heart.*** Since God has lifted him out of the pit, the psalmist freely sings a hymn of thanksgiving and praise. We get a glimpse of this kind of praise when we hear the Joyful Choir sing songs like "I'm So Blessed" and today when the Adult Choir sings "Give Thanks." But notice that the psalmist is never focused only on their praise alone. The psalmist invites everyone to join in on the chorus. "Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to God's holy name." We gather together each Sunday because worship is never meant to be a solitary activity. No, the good news of the Bible - in both the Old and the New testaments - is that we belong to a God who brings light from darkness, joy from sorrow, even life from death. Regardless of the life circumstances we may face, the difficulties and challenges that pop up without notice that can overwhelm and pull us down - regardless of all of that, the amazing good news is that we belong to a God who saves - a God who does not sympathize with us from a distance, but rather One who has descended into the pit - One who knows the pain of suffering firsthand, the One who has even triumphed over the powers of death. This psalm is usually read during the season of Easter, a reminder that death and the empty tomb are not the last words. Rather, it's resurrection and new life!

When I was in high school, I began to attend the local Baptist church in Sumter, and I remember sitting in the balcony with my friends trying to pay attention. Unlike the Greek Orthodox church in Columbia that was technically my home church, I really enjoyed the Baptist services. Though the sermon was longer, at least at the Baptist church it was in English! Like in many Baptist churches, the sermon was the main event - when it was over, we sang a hymn, received the benediction and left. When I began to attend Presbyterian churches in college, I noticed something different. While in the Baptist church the offering came first before the sermon, in the Presbyterian service the offering always came after the preaching of the Word. If you notice in our bulletin every week, the section titled "Response to the Word" follows the scripture and sermon. You see, in our tradition our offering of thanksgiving and praise is designed to be a response to the Good News. We are called to dedicate our gifts, our tithes and offerings, our whole selves to God as a response to what God has done for us. Like the psalmist, we, too, can fall into the pit of selfishness and despair. As we have confessed earlier in the service this morning, we have grown complacent in our response to God. It's so easy for us to just go through the motions. In a consumer-oriented world with so many things to entice us, we are drawn to lesser things that cannot satisfy us. So in order to live a more fruitful life, we need to embrace again the good news of God's grace and forgiveness. We are reminded of this good news through the waters

of baptism, poured into the font each week. We hear the Good News through the witness of the scriptures and the message proclaimed. And after the choir sings their anthem, then it is our turn to make a response! We stand and say together what we believe, and then we are invited to make a response through our offering. Whether we give our gifts in the plate or the baskets or through the portal on the website, what we give matters.

In our congregational meeting following the service today, we will look at our budget for next year. Through your gifts of time, talent and money we have continued to be a witness in our community for the grace and love of God. We have sought to be a place of nurture for God's children of all ages. As stated in our bulletin each week, since 1893 we have gathered to worship God with all our hearts and minds. The generations before us were good stewards of our congregation and its resources for ministry. When we landed here in this building in 1966, I believe we began debt free. As we face the challenges ahead of us in a very different time, we are blessed with the faithfulness of generations before us who have laid a solid foundation. ***In response to all the good things that God has given to us through the life of this congregation, we are called to simply bring our whole selves.*** One of the most remarkable acts of stewardship I have ever witnessed was made by Maude Lawing. During her time at The Greens nursing care center, she successfully encouraged one of her nurses to come to our church, an act of hospitality that illustrates well what it means to truly be a church of welcome. When we offer what we have to God, trusting that God can take that offering and accomplish much more than we can imagine, then we are following in the Spirit of the psalmist. Thanksgiving is not something to just think about in late November - no, thanksgiving is to be a constant way of life!

If you were here last Sunday, you may remember that I announced we would all be invited to take a few moments to speak words of gratitude as part of the service today. It could be a simple word, a sentence or a story about things that you are grateful for as members of this congregation. This time of sharing will happen as part of our morning offering.

I started today's sermon talking about the insights I gained from a recent NPR podcast on gratitude. One thing I learned that surprised me had to do with the importance of expressions of gratitude. ***When we speak or write words of thanks, like we will do this morning, something powerful happens. When words are spoken and heard, things change.*** It matters not how polished or elegant the words are - all that matters is that we offer up our hearts, our voices, giving thanks to God and to one another in all things.

Thanks be to God. Amen.