

WITH GRATEFUL HEARTS

Isaiah 12

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
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[before scripture is read]: Our Psalm reading for today is Isaiah, chapter 12, found on page 641 in your pew Bible. I invite you to follow along with me in a few moments as I read the first half of this psalm and then to keep your Bible open, because I will read the second half later.

For the last several weeks we have been highlighting one of our Presbyterian creeds or confessions each week. You may recall that among our creeds are three catechisms---the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms. A catechism summarizes the Christian faith in a question-and-answer format and is designed to be used as a teaching tool.

The Heidelberg Catechism is quite personal and speaks directly to the individual. It begins with the question: "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" And the answer is: "That I belong---body and soul, in life and in death---not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."

The psalm that is Isaiah 12 could be written as a catechism. Each verse contains answers to implied questions. And like the Heidelberg Catechism, this psalm is very personal, addressing the individual in the first half and the community of believers in the second half. Look now at verses 1, 2, and 3: "You will say in that day"---the word "you" in the Hebrew is singular, so it means, "You as an individual will say in that day"---"I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."

If we were writing these first three verses as a catechism, we would need to add the questions---and some of the answers---that are implied. So, for example, we could begin:

Why do you as an individual give thanks to God?

Because God is no longer angry with me.

Why was God angry with you?

Because I had sinned and disobeyed God.

Why is God no longer angry with you?

Because God has forgiven me of my sin.

How do you know that God has forgiven you?

Because God has comforted me.

Why do you trust in God?

Because God is my salvation.

Why are you not afraid?

Because God is my strength and my might and my salvation.

What do you do as a result?

With joy I draw water from the wells of salvation.

This three-verse psalm of individual thanksgiving recounts the spiritual journey of the person who moves from the fear of God's anger, to the comfort and strength of God's forgiveness, to the joy of salvation. The joy expressed in verse 3 cannot be contained; it propels you to seek out other people at the wells of salvation for the purpose of sharing your joy. You come together at the well to receive the living water of salvation and to give thanks to God who gives it, and then to joyfully share that living water with others out of gratitude for what you have received. In other words, this individual faith journey goes from sin to salvation to sharing, or from guilt to grace to gratitude.

In the Heidelberg Catechism, the second question is: "How many things must you know that you may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort?" The answer is: "Three. First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness. Second, how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences. Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption." From guilt to grace to gratitude; from sin to salvation to sharing.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, perhaps we need to be reminded about why we give thanks to God. Now, of course, there are many things for which we give thanks---for family and friends, food and clothing, housing and transportation, adequate income and leisure time, good health and good health care, and many other things. But the primary reason we people of faith give thanks to God is because God through Christ has freed us from our sin and has become our salvation.

Why, then, do we give thanks? Because God is our salvation. This is the message of the Heidelberg Catechism and the message of the first three verses of Isaiah 12.

The Rev. Robert Chase tells the story of a woman in his congregation who was suffering from sickle-cell anemia. She would "awaken every day in agony....Her pain was constant; her medical bills staggering. She had already lost one child to the same dreaded disease, and one of her other children was also afflicted. But she never lost her faith, or her smile, or her gently spoken thankfulness for the gift of life, even life in the midst of such suffering.

"Around Thanksgiving, a slight remission allowed her to come to worship again. She had not been able to attend for months, so she sang the hymns with particular feeling, prayed fervently with the people, listened intently to the sermon, and gave her offering joyfully as the plate was passed. When it came time for the collection of canned goods for the community's food bank, she witnessed a tremendous outpouring from the congregation as a wave of members came forward to lay their gifts at the communion table.

"Then, after everyone else was seated in silence, all eyes turned to the solitary figure still moving slowly toward the table, one painful step after another. She was softly smiling, grateful for the opportunity to bring her food for those who had less than she. On that still November morning, one of the earth's most fragile creatures, strengthened only by God's grace, empowered so many others through her example." What magnificent joy there is in sharing with others out of gratitude for the blessings of God!

The psalmist who wrote the 12th chapter of Isaiah understood the joy that comes from sharing with others---the joy of drawing water from the wells of salvation and sharing that living water with others. And so the individual journey intersects with the journey of

the community. Beginning with the fourth verse of this psalm, it is the community of the faithful who are being addressed, rather than the individual. The word “you” in verse 4 is plural in the Hebrew. So those last three verses read: “And you all will say in that day: ‘Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.’”

If we were to write a catechism based on these three verses, it might read something like this:

Why do we give thanks to God?

Because God has done gloriously.

How do we give thanks to God?

We pray to God, we sing praises to God, we shout aloud and sing for joy, we proclaim that God’s name is exalted, and we make known God’s deeds among the nations.

Why do we shout aloud and sing for joy?

Because God, the Holy One of Israel, has done great things.

How do we make known God’s deeds among the nations?

We give money to the church so that God’s name can be proclaimed in all the earth.

Why would we want to give our money to the church?

Because that is the way we can give thanks to God.

Why do we give thanks to God?

Because God is our salvation.

This coming Thursday we will gather around many tables with family and friends to give thanks to God for all of God’s blessings to us. Today we are invited to come to this table symbolically to give thanks to God for God’s blessings to us and to share with others out of gratitude for those blessings. Later in this service we will put our offerings in the offering plate and our pledge cards in the baskets, and those plates and baskets will then be brought to this table. In a very real sense, we will be putting ourselves in the offering plate and pledge basket, offering God a symbol of ourselves---our money---and offering God our pledge to give a certain amount of ourselves through our money during the next year. The pledge card reads: “Grateful for God’s love in Jesus Christ, I (or we) make the following commitment to support the mission of the church through our congregation.”

So symbolically we will all come to this table in a few minutes. We will bring God the first fruits of our labor, because we are grateful for what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. It will be like a Thanksgiving dinner where everyone brings a dish to share. Every offering envelope and every pledge card will be like a dish to share for the dinner. Will there be enough for everyone? Will there be enough to fund the ministry and the mission of this congregation through the coming year? It’s up to you.

