

Worship for March 22, 2020

Visual:



All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.

■ “The Song of Aragorn,” from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, by J.R.R. Tolkien

“Now Thank We All Our God” story:

I want to start by telling you a story, the story of a song and the man who wrote it.

The author, Martin Rinkart was a Lutheran minister who came to the city of [Eilenburg](#), in what is now Germany, but was then [Saxony](#), just over four hundred years ago. It was 1618, and a brutal war was just starting, a war that lasted for Thirty Years and came to be called the Thirty years war. The war was between various states in the area that is now a United Germany, and resulted in 20 percent of all Germans dying and as many as 50 percent in some areas. In total, eight

million people died due to the war. Prior to WWII no other war killed as many Germans.

The city of Eilenburg had a wall around it, and so many refugees from the war fled there, but the result was overcrowding, and deadly pestilence and famine. Armies overran it three times. The Rinkart home was a refuge for the victims, even though he was often hard-pressed to provide for his own family. During the height of a severe plague in 1637, Rinkart was the only surviving pastor in Eilenburg, conducting as many as 50 funerals in a day. He performed more than 4000 funerals in that year, including that of his wife.

Given that history, it might surprise you to learn that Rinkart is most famous for writing a song called “Now Thank We All Our God.” He apparently wrote it originally as a grace to be said or sung before meals, but it endures as a simple reminder that even in the worst of times, there is much to be thankful for, and that giving thanks can help us to deal with hardship.

Now thank we all our God,
with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done,
in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms
has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us strong in grace,
and guide us when perplexed;
And free us from all ills,
in this world and the next!

Here is a link to the song being performed by the Mormon Tabernacle
Choir: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7gMDXylzW8>

So let's start this service by praying a prayer of thanksgiving:

Gracious God, we give thanks this day for all your blessings, for the clothes on our backs and the shoes on our feet, for the computers before us, the friends around us, the love between us. Thank you for the wonderful workings of our bodies, for lungs that breath in oxygen and expel carbon dioxide, for digestive systems that break down food into digestible nutrients, for the blood that carries nutrients and oxygen to our cells, for immune systems that fight off intruding viruses and bacteria. Thank you for safe water to drink and wash, for our daily food, for a society that is at peace and with a relatively good government. We thank you for public health officials who have been preparing for situations like this for years and have carefully planned for what to do. We thank you for scientists working to develop treatments and vaccines. We thank you for physicians and nurses and respiratory technicians and all those who are working to educate the public, test those who show symptoms, treat the sick. Thank you for all those who are cooperating in the effort to slow the spread of this virus. Thank you that even have the strategies of social distancing and hand washing, that so many generations before us never even considered. Your gifts are abundant, O God, so abundant that if we were to write them all in books, all the world could not contain the volumes. And in these times, with so many worries, so much uncertainty, help us to live prudently, cautiously, wisely, but gratefully, hopefully, faithfully. For in the name of Jesus, who came that we might live joyfully and abundantly even in the face of death, we pray. And we pray as he taught us, as we say together...

One thing that you might want to consider over the next days, weeks and months is establishing a devotional practice, including writing a list of things you are grateful for. And don't just write the same things every day. Keep thinking of new things that you haven't noticed before, or that you've taken for granted before: the neighbor who keeps her walk clear, the trees that produce oxygen all summer long and enjoy a winter's rest; the people who pick up your compost, recycling and garbage, that when you flush the toilet there is a sewage system, the people who vacuum the hallway in your apartment building, school or office, the person from church you miss being able to see. When you really start to look, there are so, so many things for which to be grateful.

Prayer (by Moderator Richard Bott)

God?

I've been coming to the realization
that small things have a huge impact.

Sure, there's the obvious -
the Novel Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2,
that infinitesimally small assembly
of proteins, nucleic acids, lipids, and carbohydrates,
that has changed the ways
that people are living,
pushed us to step away from one another,
to make sure we keep those most vulnerable to it,
safe.

But there's also the myriad of ways
that people are responding to it.

The note in the elevator that says,
"Neighbours! I'm working from home.
If you need groceries picked up,
or urgent supplies, let me know -
especially if Covid-19 is a major worry
for your health. My number is..."

One note, yesterday.

Five notes, today -
each offering another way that people will help,
while still working for everyone's safety.

Five notes, today.
How many, tomorrow?

Thank you, God, that love and care,
can have exponential growth,
too.

Bless our neighbours,
whether in the space next door,
the country on the other side of the border,
or the continent a world away...

by helping our love,
our sharing,
our action,
to grow.

Small things.
Huge impact.

As a disciple of Jesus, I'm asking these things.

Amen.

One thing I am grateful for is Scripture, and I want to read for you a couple of short passages: first from Psalm 46:

*"God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult."*

“We will not fear.” There are times when we can say throw that line easily, because there really isn’t a lot to be afraid of. There are other times, and this is one of them, when there are genuinely things to fear: sickness, loneliness, unemployment, recession, dwindling retirement savings, getting trapped in a house with people whose emotional stability may be fraying, the way stress might make alcoholism or abuse, depression or anxiety grow. There are lots of things we could fear.

But when we claim that passage for ourselves, when we affirm that we WILL NOT fear, we claim a confidence that allows us to face our fears in hope, not a Pollyanna hope that we won’t have problems, but a hope that we can face all things through a God who has been through it all already with us, for us, in us, through us.

The second reading I want to share with you is from Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi. This is one of Paul’s prison letters. He was in prison when he wrote it, and sometimes in the past week, you might feel like social distancing or quarantine or self-isolation is not much different from a prison. It might feel like a prison, but in fact it is far from being a prison (especially an ancient prison). But it still isn’t

easy. So hear the way that Paul writes from prison, and take his words with deep seriousness because they come out of that very challenging situation:

From Philippians, chapter four:

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved...

Listen to the way Paul describes his friends in the Philippian church, people who he perhaps takes for granted while he was with them, but because he is apart and isolated, he longs for. They are his joy, his crown, his beloved.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Remember that Paul is writing this from prison. He has lots of things he could worry about, and maybe in urging others not to worry, he is also reminding himself not to worry. Instead, he says, “Rejoice! Rejoice! Always! Everywhere! Rejoice! Make your requests and prayers to God, of course, but make your requests with thanksgiving. And you will know peace, your gentleness will emerge, and become a model to others.

Right now there is a lot that we have no control over, and that can really make you pretty nervous, pretty anxious. But there are things we do have control over. And one of those things is what you set your minds on, what you focus your attention on. So Paul goes on to say:

whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

There are lots of things you could think about, lots of things you could worry about. And what you focus on determines a lot of your mental health, a lot of your spiritual health, a lot of your emotional health, and even a lot of your physical health. So when Paul says, “think about these things,” he is offering us the freedom to choose our path forward.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychologist who was being worked to death as an inmate in three concentration camps run by the Nazis during the Second World War. It was in those camps, he wrote later, that he developed the insight for which he is famous, that between what happens to us, and how we respond to what happens, there is a gap, a space, and it is that space that gives us the power to choose. “The last and the greatest of human freedoms,” he wrote, “is the ability to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

That is not much different than what Paul wrote so long before, from his prison cell: ‘think about these things: whatever is true, whatever is beautiful, whatever is admirable, whatever is excellent, whatever is worthy of praise. Think about these things.’”

You will have lots of opportunities to worry over the next few weeks. You could easily get lost in your anxiety and your frustration and your loneliness and your fear. Pay attention to what you focus on, to what you think about, and when you find yourself sliding down that rabbit hole, choose something else. Now I know that sounds much easier than it actually is, especially for those who struggle with mental illness. If you are one of those people who experience depression and anxiety, what I am saying here is in no way intended to be critical or judgmental of you. Even with cognitive-behaviour therapy, medications, psychiatrists and therapists, mental illness is debilitating, and it is not your fault. If you need help from a therapist, then find one. If you are a danger to yourself or to others, then call 911 or go to Emergency.

But even those of us who are without a clinical mental illness often find our thoughts wandering into dark and destructive territory, and we need to train ourselves to pull back from that. When your loneliness threatens to take hold, choose to reach out, to make a phone call that may ease another’s loneliness even as it eases yours. When you are feeling overwhelmed by the never-ending demands of family members, children, spouse, brothers and sisters, dig deep, find something to give thanks for, find something that is beautiful, find something worthy of praise. There may be times when the stress gets to you and you are tempted to yell, criticize or slap, to take a shot, a toke, a hit, to binge on your substance of choice (whether booze or chocolate), or all of the above. Dig deep, choose the better way. Take some deep breaths, go for a walk, cool off, or once you have cooled off, apologize. There are going to be difficult times ahead; but you can choose a better way. That is your freedom. That is the gift of faith and hope and love. Amen!

Prayers of the People: (share celebrations and concerns from comments)

Here we are, O God. We are here. Right Here, Right Now, Open to love, open to compassion, open to generosity and hope. However we understand you, whatever our questions, our doubts, our struggles, our worries, we open ourselves to your love, your healing, your wisdom, your guidance.

Make us, all and each, channels of your peace.

Fill us with your love, your healing power, so that in places of struggle, fear and loneliness, we may be your agents, your angels, instruments of your peace.

Fill us with your hope, your light, your joy, so that in places of despair and sadness, we may be your agents, your angels, instruments of your peace.

Sacred source of love and life, we ask for your protection for ourselves and those we love, but not just for us and those important to us. Protect, we pray all the world's peoples. Pour out wisdom, so that we may take the prudent route, and slow the spread of the virus. Pour out stamina, on those who work in medical offices and hospitals. Pour out endurance on those who are quarantined or in isolation, on all those locked down in group homes, seniors residences and nursing homes. Pour out peace, that those who are anxious and afraid, those hoarding, those desperate to protect themselves or greedy for a quick profit, may instead discover the joy of facing trouble together as a community. Pour out patience on us all, that we may face whatever comes with hope and faith, choosing to face the worst with the best of ourselves.

And when this is all over, O God, may we look back with gratitude, not for the illness and the suffering, but for the way it brought us all together. In the name and spirit of the healer from Galilee, we ask it. Amen.

Closing Song: "Let My Spirit Always Sing" by Shirley Erena Murray (*More Voices # 83*)

Let my spirit always sing,
though my heart be wintering,
though the season of despair
give no sign that you are there,
God to whom my days belong,
let there always be a song.

Though my body be confined,
let your word engage my mind,
let the inner eye discern
how much more there is to learn,
 see a world becoming whole
 through the window of the soul.

Let your wisdom grace my years,
choose my words and chase my fears,
give me wit to welcome change,
to accept, and not estrange,
 let my joy be full and deep
 in the knowledge that I keep.

Let my spirit always sing,
to your Spirit answering,
through the silence, through the pain
know my hope is not in vain,
 like a feather on your breath
 trust your love, through life and death.

As we bring this service to a close, let me encourage you to stay connected. I will read with interest your comments on my first attempt at online worship. We can also stay in touch by phone, and I want to encourage each of you to phone at least a couple of other people who might be isolated on a regular basis, as long as this period of social distancing lasts.

And as a **closing blessing**, I leave you with these words from another old song (*Voices United #*):

May God be with you till we meet again;
loving counsels guide, uphold you,
with a shepherd's care enfold you,
God be with you till we meet again.

May God be with you till we meet again;
When life's perils thick confound you,
put unfailing arms around you,
God be with you till we meet again.