

## **“Reasons to be Happy”**

**Psalm 103**

**March 27, 2020**

**R. Keith Stuart, Ph.D., Minister**

Have you ever asked yourself if what you are planning to say is appropriate? Your words may be true, but are they appropriate for the situation. Do they need to be shared at this time, on this occasion? Today, I want to share about God’s salvation, not as a ticket to an afterlife, but salvation as God’s blessings and our opportunity for praise. Is considering God’s blessings an appropriate word for this hour when death and destruction are on the march?

I picked up Barbara Ann Kipfer’s book, 14,000 Things to Be Happy About, in the early 90s. Since she was in the sixth grade, Kipfer has compiled a list of all the things that make us happy, 612 pages worth: A Tyconderoga pencil, seeing the moon rise, sweet fresh corn, the “snuggle right in” feeling, the position of your head as you bite into a taco.

Kipfer has her list. What would you put on your list? Maybe Crayola crayons? Smells evoke happy memories. Take your crayon and close your eyes and smell it. What does the smell call forth from your memory bank? Some of our deepest memories are lodged in a memory bank unlocked by smell. One scientific study said that in our culture the three most recognizable smells are coffee, peanut butter, and Crayola crayons.

Do you remember your first box of Crayola crayons? Were they the thin ones or the thick ones as big as your fingers? Did you get a new box before each school year? For me, part of the happiness of Crayola crayons was it meant a fresh start to a new year. New crayons, a new teacher, and a clean slate.

James Forbes once asked a group of ministers a question: “What is the congregation’s role in a particular sermon?” Today, your role is to start your own list of 14,000 things to be happy about. Use the crayon to write them down. Show your list to the person beside you. Only one rule. Write down only things you wouldn’t mind if your mother saw them.

Here are some of Barbara Ann Kipfer’s: teakettles, a toddler’s vocabulary, eight hours sleep, Labradors that think they are lapdogs, eating Oreo cookies and then looking at your teeth, six-ounce Coke bottles, remembering when kids used to want to be President, silly putty.

Here are some from children: Christmas, momma’s soft pajamas, holding lady bugs. My list includes Ben and Jerry’s Chunky Monkey ice cream, the first cup of hot coffee in the morning, a bookstore, old, new, any kind, a long straight drive down the middle of the fairway, my children’s voices on the phone, a good phrase or pun, the perfect sentence, free laughter.

Making our lists is a light exercise. It is not meant to be anything more than to bring us back to thanksgiving—for the small things—recognizing that most everything in life can be seen as a gift. Is that truth, that part of salvation is God’s blessings, appropriate to share to the Ukrainian people who might ask us to name any blessing in their pain? What would you say? What would you say that feels appropriate? Or would you just weep, which is always an appropriate response? Doesn’t affirming God’s blessings in our own lives mean we examine our lives, maybe letting go of what we don’t need and who we are not. Seeing the tears and pain of those who

suffer requires humility. We realize that the safe place where we reside is more than enough and all we need. We possess nothing we need to protect. Our salvation is in what we share. It's the freedom of the children of God, connecting with all our neighbors. No one is eliminated.

As the shelling began in Mariupol, a frail young woman with a tiny baby in a pouch ran down the path to where the milk was being distributed. She was immediately given two cartons and offered more. She hesitated and said that she still had an older child at home. An additional packet of milk would help she said, but she worried that others might not have enough. She took the third carton of milk only after she was convinced that there would be enough for everyone.

At a time when Russian soldiers were deliberately shooting at children's hospitals, kindergartens, cars with people, crushing civilians with tanks, a tiny mother of two children was worried that someone else nearby might not have enough milk. It was the first time since the war began, despondent at what was happening in the Ukraine, that I cried.

A Jesuit priest gathered eleven children, ages 4-11, and escorted them off the protective corridor ostensibly set up for refugees fleeing the city. Twice during the week, Russian bombs exploded on the safe zone. The priest marched the children around the shelling, carrying a backpack full of stale bread and three canteens of water. For three days they walked, hiding during the day. Scratched and bruised, they found a safe refuge that helped the children get to Poland.

Salvation as Blessing, or 14, 000 things to be happy about. What does this add up to theologically? Salvation comes, for me, in two forms: Salvation as Deliverance and Salvation as Blessing. Salvation as deliverance has to do with the mighty acts of God, delivering us from slavery, sickness, sin, and the fear of death.

But salvation also comes as blessing: The everyday gift of life, the matter-of-fact healings and getting well, the birth of a child, the life force that keeps us going, the food we eat, the love of family and friends, the ordinary but not really ordinary ways God sustains our lives and insists we sustain the lives of others as best we can, that we measure of lives by the goodness we extend, seen particularly in the spirit of a young mother and Jesuit priest.

This blessing of God is upon all. Jesus said God sends the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and unjust. It's what Reinhold Niebuhr calls "the impartial goodness of God beyond morality." Sometimes we neglect salvation as God's blessing to all. *Bless the Lord, O My Soul,* says the Psalmist, *and all that is within me bless God's holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all God's benefits.* This week, as you pray for this war's resolution, sit in silence until you find the appropriate word, chose to recognize gratitude until you are grateful, and praise God until you yourself are an act of praise.

And if you are so inclined, make a list. You have a crayon to write with. Amen.