

11-23-2025 Worship Service

Morning Prayer – Phyllis Voth has been at the Wesley Medical Center since Wednesday afternoon with respiratory trouble. DeWayne tells me she's slowly regaining her strength and improving and they're hopeful that she'll be able to return to Bethesda very soon.

Gracious God, as we will read in the scriptures this morning, we thank you that you ARE our refuge and strength, present with us in all circumstances – no matter what kinds of chaos might be happening all around us or within us. In the midst of our own nation as well as others being in an uproar, you are present. And you are also present in the midst of all that is honorable, just and pure, you are our rock and our redeemer.

O God, when mayhem and confusion seem to be taking the upper hand, we pray for clear vision to follow you faithfully. When people in positions of power make mean-spirited decisions, we pray for courage to live out Jesus' ways of love and compassion. When greed and selfishness flex their muscles, we pray for your Holy Spirit to intervene and transform minds and hearts so that kindness and generosity come out on top.

We thank you God that you hear our prayers; you know the longings of our hearts and the intentions of our minds. Guide us and fill us with your love so that we can be your hands and feet in the world.

We pray for those who are sick – in mind, body or spirit. We ask for your healing. We pray especially for Phyllis this morning. We thank you for the improvement that she's had in the last several days. We pray for those who are in the midst of health concerns, undergoing treatment, or who have appointments in the coming days. Be with the doctors as they bring their best wisdom to each concern and situation, so that healing can happen and well-being can be restored.

We pray, God, for those who are grieving. Be with those who are missing loved ones as we enter this holiday season. Surround them with your comfort and love, uphold them with your tender Spirit.

Be with all those who are traveling this week. We pray for safety as people make their way to their destinations and back home again.

On this final Sunday of the church year we give thanks that Jesus is Messiah and King, that he came to bring your kingdom here on the earth. As we begin the new church year next Sunday, help us prepare to refocus, to recommit and to remember that we follow Jesus, and his way is the way of love. Amen. Let's continue to worship by giving our offerings.

Message -- Thanksgiving; a state of mind – Psalm 46 and Philippians 4
Pastor Lois Harder

When you think of Thanksgiving what images come to your mind? Do you think of that first Thanksgiving at Plymouth with the European settlers and the Indigenous folks? Or maybe the

Norman Rockwell painting? Perhaps you think of a time that you volunteered to serve a Thanksgiving meal at a homeless shelter? Or maybe the most vivid image you have a childhood memory of your extended family gathering?

Thanksgiving is typically a day when we gather with family or friends, eat until we can't eat anymore, maybe reminisce a little as we sit around a table laden with delicious foods and lovely autumn decorations. In some households a few moments might be spent reviewing the past year and naming things for which we're thankful. More than likely several hours are spent watching some sort of sporting event on a large screen television and a lot of time spent wisely avoiding the topics of politics or religion.

It's usually a good day, or maybe a good, long weekend if people have traveled from a distance as many do to be together.

This morning I'd like to help us remember that Thanksgiving, as we know it, and as great a holiday as it is, didn't come to us from the Bible or from the liturgical tradition. It came from Europe and from the European immigrants, a celebration of the harvest and giving thanks for it. To be sure, the Indigenous people, (and many people) also had an established tradition of giving thanks for the harvest, so the Europeans didn't invent it. 1621 is the year that's usually cited as the first time Europeans and the Wampanoag people tenuously shared their traditions of giving thanks at Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Even though the actual holiday of Thanksgiving doesn't come directly from the Bible there are, of course, LOTS of Biblical references that encourage gratitude, praise and thankfulness to God. So like many of our religious traditions, this one has become acculturated, tightly wrapped into the secular traditions and sometimes blurred into our faith traditions. And often when this happens, the tradition takes on a sort of mythological and over-exaggerated sense of significance. Because over the decades, it absorbs and incorporates the importance of both the secular and the faith aspects, so after awhile it's this sort of unrealistic, commercialized, impossible-to-live-up-to expectation. Think Christmas, Easter, Halloween (or, All Hallows Eve), and yes, Thanksgiving.

So I'd like us to think for a few minutes about ways we might reconsider what "thanksgiving" means and how we can, maybe reframe it and reclaim it a bit more strongly into our faith perspective.

The Psalmists knew that it's very rare in the human experience to have just praise and thanksgiving without also having some lament and grief. And we know this too, from our own lives. But in our culture, it doesn't "sell well" to acknowledge how intertwined and connected the whole breadth of our experiences are. I chose Psalm 46 this morning partly because that was the text of the choir anthem and I thought it would be lovely to both hear it sung and then to reflect more on it. But I could have chosen any number of psalms that express thanksgiving, trust, praise or gratitude and also in the same psalm lament, grief, fear or anger.

In Psalm 46, the writer is acknowledging that there is great trouble and fear! And that in those circumstances God is our refuge and our strength. The psalmist writes that WHEN the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea and its waters roar and rage,

when the mountains shake because of the surging waves of the sea – we won't be afraid, because we know that help from God is always near in times of great trouble. When there are wars in every corner of the earth, at some point God says, "That's enough! Now know that I am God!" God is present with people in our fear and lament and so, even then, we can exalt and praise God.

Just a few psalms before, in Psalm 42 we read again about the whole human experience in these familiar 11 verses:

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your torrents; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.

By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"

As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

In this Psalm the writer is remembering, recalling God's faithfulness in the past and the times when the psalmist, along with the congregation, gave shouts and songs of thanksgiving and praise. Even in the midst of these memories, and even as he acknowledges God as his rock, his soul is cast down; he's lamenting the distance that he feels between him and God. The psalmist ends with a reminder to hope in God, his help who he will praise again. In these 11 verses, the psalmist offers the gamut of human emotion and the assurance that God is with us through it all.

In Paul's epistle to the Philippians, we're reminded of this remarkable convert's faith and perseverance. Paul was a Roman citizen and a Pharisee, accustomed to the finer things in life – before his conversion. Like all the other disciples, he gave up nearly all of his creature comforts when he became a follower of The Way. The rest of his life was a series of laments and thanksgiving – tightly interwoven. Paul was in prison in Rome when he wrote this letter. It was likely underground, completely dark, built out of rocks, damp, replete with critters, his body chained to a wall – not the sort of prison we think of today. From that place he wrote:

“Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.”

And as a bonus exhortation, he added this reminder: “...if anything is excellent, and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these things... The God of peace will be with you.”

As we gather for Thanksgiving this week, I hope that these reminders from the psalmist and the Apostle Paul can help us bring our faith to it in a little more integrated way. Thanksgiving is a lovely holiday and a wonderful time to gather for good food and good fellowship. Just remember that it doesn’t have to be perfect, like a painting! It can be real, with real grief and frustration, fear and uncertainty. The biblical writers have given us full permission to feel all of those things – and to tell God all about it. And in the same breath, we can trust and thank God – our rock and our redeemer, our refuge and our strength.

You may have noticed the praying hands added to the table this morning. Thanks to Lee and Mary Alice Hertzler for loaning this beautiful piece to us. Lee carved these hands from a photo of his own hands. This carving and, indeed, Lee and Mary Alice’s lives are reminders and examples right here in our midst of leaning into the fullness of all that this life brings, and of how to trust and praise God each step of the way, how to make thanksgiving a state of mind.

For our sending song I chose number 396 because the text is taken from several of Paul’s letters, including Philippians 4:6 – the third verse of the hymn.

Benediction –

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.