

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin Eden

Pentecost 21
Saturday, October 21, 2023, at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, October 22, 2023, at 9:00 a.m.

“Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart”

Thessalonians 1:1-10

St. Paul commends the church in Thessalonica for their perseverance in the faith in the face of persecution because of their faith. He commends them for not turning away from the One, true God – for not going back to worshiping the pagan gods of their neighbors. Life was tough for the Christians in the First Century. You may have to deal with some uninformed, obnoxious atheist co-workers or college professors, but the Christians in Paul’s day were driven from their homes, put into prison, beaten, and many of them were killed for their faith. “These are they who have come out of the Great Tribulation” as we hear the angel tell John in Revelation.

Listen to what the Roman historian Tacitus says as he describes what he saw happening with his own eyes to the Christians during the time of St. Paul. (And by the way, Tacitus was happy this was happening). Tacitus wrote: “In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport: for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and [bitten] to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when the day waned, burned to serve for the evening lights.”

Emperor Nero lit up the city of Rome with human torches. This is the reality of persecution which inspires Paul to write to the Philippians, “I can do all things

through Him who strengthens me.” “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

It is into this reality that Paul gives thanks for the faithful devotion of the Thessalonians who received the Word of God “in much affliction.” We look at the videos and pictures coming out of Israel following the terrorist attacks. And that was horrifying. However, in my lifetime alone, more than two million Christians have been killed by Muslims (just in Africa), but they didn’t have iPhones to record it. So we generally didn’t see it.

Sometimes I feel embarrassed at the ease with which we are able to conduct our lives and gather for worship. Don’t ever take this for granted. Satan would love to raise up another Nero Caesar. That is, after all, what the number 666 is in Revelation. Hebrew uses letters for numbers and when you transliterate Nero Caesar from Greek to Hebrew, the Hebrew letters total 666.

John writes in Revelation of the “number of his name” and “let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.”

We as Christians must always be prepared for persecution in its many forms, even if or when the next Nero Caesar rises up. Paul is happy to acknowledge that, in spite of all their afflictions, the Thessalonians are filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit and thankfulness. He begins his letter, “We give thanks to God always for all of you” [1 Thess. 1:2]. Wow, that must be a perfect congregation. He is *always* thankful for *all* the Thessalonians.

But, at the end of his letter, he writes, “admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak” [1 Thess. 5:14]. So, the church in Thessalonica is not

a congregation of perfect people. Like all churches, it is a gathering of the sick who need medicine, of the hurting who need healing, of the weak and the anxious who need comfort.

Last week, we heard Paul say, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice. . . The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything” [Phil. 4:4, 6].

Paul will say at the conclusion of this first letter to the Thessalonians, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you [1 Thess. 5:16-18].

This got me thinking about the connection between thanksgiving (gratitude), and anxiety. There are numerous studies which show that, when people express genuine thankfulness and gratitude, they gain a positive response in their limbic system (which regulates your emotions and personality as much or more than anything else). Expressing gratitude directly affects your amygdala (which is a small almond-shaped part of your brain) which regulates positive and negative emotional reactions, fear, aggression, and even helps you remember how to ride a bike (once you already learned it). It’s a useful little part of your brain.

There is a good reason why Jesus strongly correlates (and Paul proclaims the same message, as we see) “give thanks, and don’t be anxious about anything.” Please don’t hear me wrong: I am not saying that offering a thankful prayer is the answer for all anxiety disorders. Like I said last week, in the face of the trials of life, I cannot command you to “be joyful”; “be content.” We try that with our children and it doesn’t work. “Be happy or I’ll give you something to cry about.”

Telling someone struggling with anxiety or depression to “snap out of it,” “be at peace,” “be thankful.” After all, Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” But

you struggle; and you don't feel joy or peace or contentment amidst the chaos. And now, what Paul wrote as Gospel, has become a Law to you.

The medicine, the healing, the comfort for the sick, the hurting, the weak, and the anxious is the Gospel. The burden of guilt that you have no strength to lift has already been carried to the cross. The worries and cares of this world; the news of the day which seems like chaos stirred up by Satan himself; all this is totally under control.

As we heard the Lord say through the prophet Isaiah, "I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all of these things.

As we look out on the landscape of our lives, on a personal level or an international level, and we see chaos and reasons to fear, the amygdala in your brain is going to react. Keep in mind all of these words from Isaiah and Paul and Jesus, as you look out upon your life, you may see chaos and confusion, like is often described on a battlefield as the "fog of war."

The reality is that victory has already been won. The battle is over. Jesus declared from the cross, "It is finished." All that is left for us to do is to give thanks that we have been rescued as we gather with the angels, arch-angels, and all of the company of heaven celebrating that Christ's victory is our victory. As we just sang: The strife is over. The battle is won. Amen.