

"Our Thanksgiving"

"Slava Bogu!" I say when I am on the phone with my mom and I hear that my mom's health is doing better. "Slava Bogu!" I say when I am on the phone with my dad when he tells me that he is losing his job but he is staying positive. "Slava Bogu!" I say when I am on the phone with my brother, when he tells me that he is taking care of his health and his kids. "Slava Bogu" is a Russian phrase that means "Glory to God or Praise the Lord!" But people say "Slava Bogu" whether they believe in God or not. It just became an expression of the Russian vernacular. I learnt that the American English has an equivalent phrase, "Thank God!" We use it a lot sometimes without really meaning that we are thanking God. So we use these phrases to express our thanks, whether or not we mean to say Thank you to God. Our text this morning invites us to truly say "Thank you, God."

These verses from the first chapter of Luke's Gospel comes to us as a blessing and a prophecy of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. He speaks these words in the Temple right when his baby was circumcised and named. Now, some of you remember this story of the circumstances around the birth of John the Baptist. In fact, this morning's text could also be considered as an Advent text and those of you who are participating in our church-wide Advent study this year will be able to hear that story again in the first chapter of the book by Amy Jill-Lavine, *The Light of the World*. Some of you have already had the first lesson and know what I am talking about. And of course some of you might not remember or even know this story at all. So together let's quickly revisit the story.

Zechariah was a priest in a village somewhere in Judea, and he was married to Elizabeth. They had no children. Luke writes that one day Zechariah was performing his duties as a priest in the Temple bringing the incense offering. Usual duties on a usual day. But the people who were standing outside the sanctuary while he was doing that thought that it was taking Zechariah longer than usual. Well, indeed it did. Something really unusual was happening in the temple. The Angel of the Lord came to Zechariah and announced to him that he and Elizabeth would have a child and they would call him John. And that John would turn the hearts of the people to prepare them for the Lord. Now, Zechariah did not quite believe the angel and sort of started arguing with him by letting him know (like the angel did not know) that he was old and Elizabeth was too. How rude. Because Zechariah did not believe the Angel, the angel gave Zechariah a sign that all of this would come true. And the sign was that Zechariah had become mute. The story goes on to tell us that Elizabeth got pregnant and when the baby was born, on the eighth day the family and their friends went to the Temple to circumcise and to name the baby. People were assuming that the baby would be named after his father as the tradition goes, but Elizabeth said, "No, he would be called John." The people did not believe the mom

and turned to the dad, who still was not able to talk, and with signs explained to him what was going on.

My mind goes to the charade games. Some of us love this game more than others. But it would have been interesting to imagine how Zechariah and Elizabeth communicated not only during this moment of naming but all the nine months of pregnancy. Maybe when you are married that many years, you don't need to talk to each other. And my gosh! The guy did not talk for almost nine months! Wow! That might have been nine months of "peace on Earth, good will to Elizabeth!" and maybe even Zechariah himself, for some guys don't really like to talk. Anyway, Zechariah was given a tablet and he wrote "He will be called John." And in that moment Zechariah's mouth was open! Everyone in the temple was afraid and they knew that something unusual was happening. They knew that God's presence was in the midst of them. And then Zechariah began to speak.

And the words that he said were the words that we all heard just a moment ago when Larry read them for us. Traditionally these words or the passage is called "Benedictus" from Latin, which means "bless or praise." When we heard these words just a moment ago, did it sound like a song of praise or a psalm of praise? It has a lot of language and symbolism of the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, it is considered to be a psalm of praise of early Jewish Christians and it has been used in the Christian liturgies until this day. This hymn is truly a hymn of praise and thanksgiving for all the promises of God that God has fulfilled through Christ's redemptive work: for God's mercy, for God's gift of salvation of Jesus Christ, for God's light shining in the darkness, and for the way of peace. This hymn is lifting up the role of John, Zechariah's son in these promises and blessings. But Zechariah was naming these things not only for himself in the excitement of his own child being a part of this redemptive work of God in this world but for all who heard this hymn. This thanksgiving for all the blessings of God inspire our own hearts to name the things that we are thankful for.

Of course it is very appropriate to do as it is a Thanksgiving month. It is Thanksgiving Sunday. Thanksgiving is actually this week. We all try to be better about giving thanks this month. People take challenges on social media to do a thanksgiving post every day. Some people try to do an exercise either every morning or evening as a part of their routine to name the things they are thankful for. Is anybody doing something like that this month? The society in general talks about attitude of gratitude a lot. Because the level of negativity in our world is far beyond normal. I even found an article online that talks about 25 reasons that Thanksgiving is your least favorite holiday. Some things were understandable: like the origins of this holiday that began with mass killings of Native Americans. It is also the beginning of the holiday season and for those who are grieving, suffering themselves or going through any other hardships, holidays can be really rough. But then the article named things like, "you're forced to watch football." "You get interrogated by family at dinner." "You eat so much, you end up hating yourself."

“Someone always makes a Jell-O salad.”

(<https://www.insider.com/worst-thanksgiving-negatives-2017-10>)

It is quite ironic to see the 25 negative comments about the holiday called Thanksgiving. But what the researches and psychologists found out is that we have a predisposition for negativity in our brain, thanks to the evolution process. I do not have an expertise to talk more about that. But what it means is that we get stuck in negative experiences longer and even if something good happens we are still thinking about that one negative thing. A few years ago I watched a great Ted Talk by Allison Ledgerwood, a psychologist, that is called “getting stuck in the negatives.” She says that when her one paper was rejected, then when the other two papers get accepted, she still thought about the one that was rejected. She says that it takes a lot of mental effort for us to focus on positive things and be thankful. So practicing gratitude regularly can help us change our brains so we can focus more on what is positive in our lives and notice it more and more. Yes, this is all good.

But I am thinking about us, Christians, whose thanksgiving is not simply naming the things that we are grateful for. We actually thank God! When we give thanks to God, we acknowledge God’s reality with us. And the more we do it, the more assured we are of God’s reality and presence in our lives. You see Zechariah was not only grateful for his son, John and for all these promises of God, his praise and thanksgiving proclaimed the reality of God for himself and for all who heard him. Zechariah affirmed the reality of God’s reign in this world. This proclamation was for all to hear of what was coming, that God did not forget God’s people, that God remembered. It says in the text that Zechariah was prophesying. We often think about prophecy as a prediction of the future. But from the Hebrew Bible and Christian tradition, we know that prophecy is about pointing to the reality, naming a truth for others to see. Zechariah was pointing to the reality of God emerging among them. He was pointing to the reality of God that was breaking through in the lives of regular people. We call that reality God’s kingdom where Christ the King is on the throne. You see today we celebrate not only thanksgiving, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the church calendar year when we recognize Christ’s kingship over the world and our lives and whose redemptive work fulfills God’s promises. So God is at work through Christ bringing peace, shining light into the darkness, performing the work of salvation in people’s hearts and lives, bringing healing and wholeness, bringing hope.

This past Monday I had a prayer meeting in our prayer chapel with a few members of our congregation who have been closely supporting me and praying with me and for me during the process towards my ordination. Larry’s preaching last Sunday on how God’s steadfast love endures forever in our lives inspired me to ask my prayer team members to share how they see God’s presence in their lives in the past month or so. I am sharing some of these stories with their permission. One person talked about a friend whose trip to Ireland turned into a testimony of God’s love in her life and care for her family. It was one of those “I just happened to sit next to this woman on the plane...” stories. This woman ended up showing this friend an

area and a church where her great great father worshipped God. The other person shared how in the challenging times, times of anxiety and uncertainty for her child, she has received an encouragement and love through her church friends. One person shared about her sister with whom she rarely shares conversations about God talking about God's love and care for her mom and for their family in the midst of a deep struggle for her mom.

Someone else shared about how our church has become a home for them and for their family and offered the gift of healing for all of them. Someone else talked about the emerging ministries of care: grief share and cancer support group at our church and how amazing to see God's leading them and calling them to this. And one more person talked about how a very difficult situation of incarceration now is bringing healing and hope for our local community in very specific ways and lifting up the gifts of those who were incarcerated in the past.

As we shared these things with each other, the prayer chapel was filled with faith, with joy, with thankfulness, with peace. God's presence and joy were palpable. Tears were shed. Warm smiles were on the faces. We all knew in those few moments without a doubt that God's steadfast love endures forever indeed. We knew that God has been faithful to us and that God remembered us. We knew that we were a community of believers aware of God's reality breaking through in our lives. Those were very simple things that these friends in faith shared. The Angel did not come down, they were not mute for nine months. But the reality of God was experienced and shared. Our faith was strengthened. The light was shining. The hope was there.

Friends, on this Christ the King Sunday we recognize Christ's kingship over our lives, and we join Zechariah in his song of praise and thanksgiving. We give thanks not only to be grateful to God but to name God's reality in our lives that more and more we can live it and participate in it and share it with others. So as you sit at your Thanksgiving tables, with your family friends, share the words of thanksgiving for them and with them and for God. So that reality of God could become a reality for them as well. Thanks be to God! Amen.