

Give Thanks to the Lord

Scripture: Psalm 136

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Thanksgiving Day Service**

People of God: What more needs to be said this morning? We have come into the presence of our God with our songs of thanksgiving. We have offered up to him our prayers of thanksgiving. We have seen visible reminders of how we have responded with thanksgiving. What more needs to be said?

Perhaps not too much more. Though I don't think I can get away with not saying anything this morning. And so, just a few words to remind us, once again, of the basics of Thanksgiving. Psalm 136 is a good Psalm for doing that task. It reminds us of the parts of thanksgiving: first, to whom we give thanks; second, for what we give thanks; and thirdly, our response of thanksgiving.

First of all, to whom do we give thanks? The obvious answer is God. That's made pretty clear in the opening three verses and closing verse of this Psalm:

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

Give thanks to the God of gods.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords...

Give thanks to the God of heaven.

Now as you hear those verses one after the other, you discover that the Psalmist is not content to merely to name God, with that basic term. Instead, he piles phrase upon phrase to describe his God. He is the Lord, the God of gods, the Lord of lords, the God of heaven. That's whom we are dealing with.

That's the one to whom we must give thanks. Look at that word "thanksgiving." It's about giving thanks. But to whom is that directed? To oneself? To each other? To the creation? No, it is given to God.

But not a generic God. In Canadian culture, unlike American society, religious faith is considered private and personal; to be kept to oneself and not shared. And if the word, God, is to be mentioned, as it might be at Thanksgiving, it is used with that very generic term God—so that many religious traditions can be included.

The psalmist would have nothing to do with that. His description of God is bold and daring. He is the LORD, the covenant God who has given his covenant promises to his people. He is above all other gods. In fact, he is the only true God, who is the Creator of all. And we would add, in the light of the NT, he is the Triune God, Father Son and Holy Spirit.

And so our thanksgiving is directed, not to some generic view of God, but to a very real and powerful Being, the God of the Scriptures, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who is at work in our lives through the Holy Spirit. Our praise, our prayers, and our offerings are directed towards him.

Why? Because, as verse four expresses it, “he alone does great wonders.” Wonders: The mighty doings of the Lord. The great actions he has performed for his people. The blessings the Lord showered upon his people. And what some of these great wonders are, are listed in verses 5 through 25, the bulk of the psalm.

Now when we read that list we tend to divide them into two parts. A shorter part in which we have the wonders of God in creation. Verses 5 to 9 echo Genesis One and the creation of the world. Creation is a mighty act of the Lord; essential to our life because we are created beings, meant to live in this creation. For the creation, we need to give thanks to the Lord.

Then in verses 10-25, we have events mentioned where God was involved in the lives of his people, especially their deliverance from Egypt and the conquest of the promised land. These are acts of salvation—God saving his people from their enemies. For these acts of redemption, we need to give thanks to the Lord.

How have we experienced the wonders of the Lord in this past year? Let us remember the great acts of the Lord in creation and in sustaining us in this past year. If you could add your verses to this Psalm, what you speak about?

The blessings we have enjoyed in creation have been quite evident this morning, with our Community Garden and the Canadian Food Bank Plot, tokens of a broader harvest that is on-going. Despite our complaining about the weather—too wet in the spring, too hot in July, too intense of thunderstorms—still, we have a harvest. For the blessings of creation, let us give thanks to the Lord.

And then, we can reflect upon how the Lord has been with us in this past year. How many baptisms have we witnessed since last Thanksgiving? Plenty. And when we have faced difficult times, because disease or death confronted us, we could draw comfort from the Lord. And after a long search for a Director of Youth and Young Adults, the Lord sent Pastor Joe our way. For these acts of God's care for his people, let us give thanks to the Lord.

Have we covered this whole Psalm? We've answered the question: To whom we should give thanks: God. We've seen the list of why we should give thanks: the blessings of creation and redemption. It seems that we're done. But actually, we've only covered half of the Psalm. We've only dealt with the first half of each verse. A word needs to be mentioned about the constant refrain of the people in the second line of each verse: His love endures forever.

This constant refrain makes this Psalm unique in the Psalter. You don't find anything like it in any other Psalm. It is clear that this Psalm was intended to be read responsively, as we did it this morning. And in this constant refrain, the people respond to what is said in first part of each verse with their affirmation: His love endures forever.

After 26 times, did it get tiring? Did it get boring? After 26 times, you might wonder whether it would ever stop. Perhaps you lost track of where we were, until I stopped. Maybe there's a lesson in that exercise. This repetitive refrain shows that God's love to us goes on and on, forever.

But maybe, as the people recited this Psalm, the excitement and the intensity grew. With every reminder of God's love shown to them in creation and in their lives, they could marvel at God's grace and mercy in their lives. Yes, God has been good to them.

Yes, God has been good to us. And so, we give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His love endures forever. Amen.