

# Giving Thanks

Dr. Lal Hmingliani Browne

 Psalm 30

I am here this morning to receive your amazement and praise for having survived an eight-day meeting. It was a meeting with morning, afternoon, evening and late night sessions. I never knew I could sit still for hour after hour and stay awake ... most of the time. And, I never knew I could be in so many hours of meetings and never once talk out loud. Can you believe it? A Silent Hmingi?

All admiration aside, I returned a week ago early Sunday morning from Portland. I had been serving as one of the seven commissioners from Peace River Presbytery to the 222nd General Assembly of our Presbyterian Church USA. I went with reluctance. In fact, I wanted to cancel out and husband, Will, told me attending was in one of my ordination vows ... so I went, but I made him go with me. I wasn't going to suffer alone!

Since I have brought it up, I will tell a few things about General Assembly. But, this is a sermon and not a report. Please remember I am going to use my experience at General Assembly as an illustration for what Psalm 30 teaches us.

- We elected exciting new leadership for our Presbyterian Church (USA). We now have co-moderators for the first time ever. It is very appropriate as this is the 60th anniversary year of women ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. That first woman ever ordained is the Rev. Margaret Towner who is

still active and lives at the Glenn Ridge.

- At this assembly, we elected two ordained women as co-moderators - Jan Edmiston and Denise Anderson. Jan and Denise were energetic and excited. Under their leadership the assembly moved forward with grace. We also elected a third generation African American pastor, J. Herbert Nelson, to be our Stated Clerk;
- The worship was varied in style and well-led. Our new Presbyterian Hymnbook was joyfully utilized. And, we commissioned new missionaries;
- We apologized to those who have been sexually abused in the church and established stronger policies to protect children in particular;
- We expressed deep sorrow to those in the LGBTQQ community for harm done to them in and by the church;
- We decided not to divest immediately from fossil fuel companies in order that we might have more influence in their board meetings;
- We stayed with our support for a two-state solution in Palestine/Israel;
- We welcomed guests from around the world and from a variety of faiths; and,
- We adopted the Belhar Confession into our Book of Confessions; and
- Approved the new Directory of Worship into our Book of Order.

I ended up deeply grateful to God for the gift of being a commissioner. I found myself fascinated with everything that went on. I was in awe as I watched how the Spirit worked through the words, worship, table fellowship, motions, amendments and amendments to

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the amendments. I went to do my duty. I return having received a blessing that alters the way I see my life and my ministry.

The next part is what makes the General Assembly an illustration of what our Scripture lesson today teaches us. Some people approached the Assembly holding as a memory what God had done for our church in the past. Others came mourning for how our church is different from what it was in years long gone. Still others came fearing we were dying. But we experienced something different.

As our new Stated Clerk, J. Herbert Nelson said, “We are not dead ... we are alive!” I come away from the General Assembly not with a prayer that God would work a miracle and save our church, but with the conviction that God has already worked that miracle!

We are already saved and called to live out what God has

already done anew for us. We are not done with our need for God's help but then we Presbyterians never thought we were. Our identity is “Reformed and always being reformed.” Nelson went on to say, “We are reforming and transforming the world, one person at a time.” We are alive and

loving God and loving our neighbor!

In Psalm 30, the psalmist tells us thanking God, for the help God has given in the past, is not enough. He was sure and is still sure that God rescued his life and granted him abundance in life. The psalmist lived giving thanks to God for his salvation. The psalmist sees himself strong in the Lord - unmovable as a strong mountain. As it tells in verses 6 and 7,

*As for me, I said in my prosperity, ‘I shall never be moved.’ By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain;*

The psalmist is prosperous, strong and secure and he is faithful in giving thanks to God for making him the way he is.

But then the psalmist experiences a dark night of the soul. Great saints and ordinary people have experienced that sudden and dreadful sense that God is absent from their lives. As the psalmist says in (verse 7b):

*“you hid your face; I was dismayed.”*

He knows himself to be in urgent need of God's help again!

Gratitude expressed only in the past tense misguides us. If we are focused on a specific moment of salvation and blessing by God, we may think we have ‘arrived.’ We may be ready to

live our whole lives based on gratitude for what God did in the past. But that is dangerous.

To our great good fortune, the God who loved and saved us once, is in a loving, saving and ongoing relationship with us. The covenant of that relationship establishes that we shall love and worship and serve God; and, that God will love and protect and save us. We do not receive just one gift of grace. Our daily lives are full of God's grace. As we see in John 1:16,

*“from God's fullness we have all received Grace upon Grace.”*

Our newly approved Directory of Worship says:

**W-1.0102: Grace and Gratitude**

*God acts with grace; we respond with gratitude. God claims us as beloved children; we proclaim God's saving love. God redeems us from sin and death; we rejoice in the gift of new life. This rhythm of divine action and human response - found throughout Scripture, human history, and everyday events - shapes all of Christian faith, life, and worship.*

Now here is the part where I start to meddle. In gratitude there can be no “been there, done that.” If that is what our gratitude looks like - all past tense - then we are in for an experience of the face of God being hidden from us. We are in for dismay.

But Psalm 30 teaches us that - that is not the end of the story. God acted to save the psalmist from dismay. God did good for us in the past. God is doing good for us now. And, God will do good for us in every future day of need. In the end we can return for God's grace and help as often as we need it. For me that is every day. For my husband it is every hour!

A quote from our newly adopted Belhar Confession tells us:

*We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and*

*Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.*

Let me put this in a context for this weekend. On this Independence Day weekend, we know that the freedom we enjoy is not just based on sacrifices made in the past and God's help received in the past. Our Independence is being renewed today in new guidance and help from God, and, by soldiers walking in harm's way for our protection. And, we know we shall need God's help and soldiers' sacrifice in the future. We thank God and we thank them and give thanks to God for them.

We can live giving thanks. We can make the psalmist's song our own.

We come to the Lord's Table today even as the General Assembly came to the table every time it worshiped in Portland.

We come to celebrate the grace of God's love given to us in Christ in every time and circumstance. The old church term for this celebration is the “Eucharist.” It comes from the Greek term “Eukaristos” which literally means the giving of gratitude or thanks. We end as the psalmist ends Psalm 30, praising and thanking God.

*You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever. Amen.*

**Psalm 30**

*I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to*

*the Pit Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. As for me, I said in my prosperity, 'I shall never be moved.' By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed. To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: 'What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!' You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you for ever.*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

**Prayer of Illumination**

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our God and our Redeemer. Amen.*



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