

Psalm 95:1-7a

Thanksgiving (Rewrite from 11-21-99)  
Lincoln, NE 11-22, 2009

### A Reason to Give Thanks **(Slide 1)**

- <sup>1</sup> Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
- <sup>2</sup> Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.
- <sup>3</sup> For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods.
- <sup>4</sup> In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him.
- <sup>5</sup> The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.
- <sup>6</sup> Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;
- <sup>7</sup> for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

On October 3, 1863, these words were penned as part of Abraham Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation making it a national holiday. The nation was in the throws of the Great Civil War with thousands of casualties on both sides. Lincoln wrote, "We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!" These words could have been written today. We too have become self-sufficient as a nation. We have focused upon wealth and prosperity while becoming less and less grateful for what we have received.

The text that I read today begins with two verses of human response to God. "Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. <sup>2</sup> Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song." This is a reasonable response to a holy, loving and generous God. Thanksgiving is a RESPONSE. It is recognition that God is faithful and merciful to his people. It is admitting that nothing happens by chance. That God's hand is in the events and movements of our lives. We can look at thanksgiving in two ways. We can see it as a remote theological concept or we can view it as a very personal connection with God.

I believe that it is more important to see it as personal. Thanksgiving is about reflecting on what God has done in our lives and offering thanks for his

goodness. I need to apologize then, because I typically don't like to preach on ME. I don't like my experiences to be the focal point of a sermon, but when it comes to Thanksgiving, I am overwhelmed by God's presence and bounty in my life. So just this once, you will have to hear about some of my experiences of the past year.

When I look back on just this year alone, I not only admit that God was present, but I am AMAZED at the work of God's hand. Last year, Grace and I were feeling tired. We decided it was time for a break so I put my efforts into planning a four-month sabbatical to rejuvenate my passion for ministry. I applied with the Lilly Foundation to receive a grant to cover four months of expenses in the Czech Republic. The foundation gives 110 of these grants each year. We would live at the Baptist Seminary in Prague. I would do some maintenance work like painting and repairs at the seminary and then on weekends, we would travel out to some of the Baptist churches and worship. Grace would do some writing and Stephanie would attend school at an English speaking Christian school in Prague.

One year ago this week, we received a letter saying that we did not receive the grant. My heart sunk when I opened the letter and saw words like "regret" and "unfortunately". I was pretty discouraged because this was something we felt we really needed. Even as we were planning the sabbatical, we had worked on a "plan B". We decided a motorcycle trip on Route 66 would give us time away and we could really rest and step away. We would come back refreshed and ready for ministry. So in May, we left on our trip. Yet while we were away and praying and contemplating where God might be moving us in ministry, we began to sense that God was moving us in an unexpected direction. Yes, I had met with the search committee of Second Baptist for a brief face-to-face back in April, but I really wasn't sure where God was moving us at that time. Yet on our motorcycle trip, it became clear that God was moving us in a new direction. Here's the deal. When we applied for Prague, we had agreed to stay in Bismarck at least two more years. Yet in one letter, God released us from going to Prague which was OUR heart's desire, but also released us from remaining in Bismarck. What we have both come to see in hind-sight, is that God's desire had become our heart's desire. He took us in a direction that has restored our joy and reinvigorated us for ministry. When I look at this past year, I am utterly amazed at the goodness and grace of God. He saw our future much better than we could.

I was disappointed when we didn't get to go to Prague. God had a bigger plan and it is clear to me that his plan is a perfect plan. I praise Him and give him thanks for his wisdom. By the way, we went to Prague (That is Prague, NE) Back in September we took a motorcycle ride an hour north of here, and now we can say we've been there.

I can resonate with the words of the Psalmist in verse 1, **“Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.”** I can see other blessings of this past year. I gained a new son-in-law and two beautiful grand-daughters and also a FUTURE son-in-law. We were on pins and needles this fall in purchasing our home and God was gracious to us in the darkest hour when we thought it might not happen.

In the next three verses of our text, it describes WHY we worship the Lord.<sup>3</sup> **For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods.**<sup>4</sup> **In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him.**<sup>5</sup> **The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.** Our worship is not only in response to his goodness in our lives, but it is in response to who He is. His nature and his position. He is above all, including kings and presidents. All of nature is subordinate to him and he has complete dominion over depths of the sea and the mountain peaks. Last Sunday as I spoke about stewardship, I mentioned that God is the true owner of everything. He gives it to us, but we often hang on to it tightly, refusing to give back to him. We are again reminded in our text this morning that God owns it all. The worshiper, or the Psalmist who wrote it, is acknowledging the fact of ownership, dominion and authority as he enters worship.

The thankful heart is one that acknowledges that everything we experience is a blessing from God. *WE* have not obtained it on our own, but rather the one who controls the depths of the sea and the mountain peaks – also gives substance to our lives. As you gather at the thanksgiving table this year, ask yourself this questions: **WHO AM I TO THINK THAT I COULD ACHIEVE ALL THIS?**

This morning, we bring our pledges before God as a way of saying “Thank you.” If you are a visitor and are not accustomed to this practice, let me explain. As members and attendees of Second Baptist, we have opportunity to act on faith but writing down on a card what we intend to give financially to the church in the calendar year 2010.

We do it in faith believing that God will provide the resources, we just have to let go and give it week to week. I reminded the congregation last week that giving is not so much about the church as it is about the spiritual discipline of the giver.

This morning, I am asking the congregation to bring forward their pledge cards and lay it here at the front where we will pray and ask God to honor each pledge by providing his bounty to the giver. Each week when we give, this moment today is a milestone and reminder of that commitment to honor God with our gifts. Amen.