

Today we give thanks to God for the blessings of this past year. And we can say, "God, we thank you for everything that you have done for us in 2021." But I wouldn't be surprised if you maybe found that a little difficult to say, because honestly, this past year has been hard. We have struggled with a drought. We have struggled with all kinds of national problems, economic problems, and a whole host of other things that would take too long to talk about. And all of that together might leave us asking: what is there to be thankful for? How can we give thanks to God even in the midst of an evil and hard time? But Christians, our Old Testament reading for today from Habakkuk shows us how.

Because Habakkuk himself lived during a very difficult time in Israel's history. About a century earlier, the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed. The Assyrians had carried them all away into exile because of their sins. But the southern kingdom of Judah didn't learn the lesson. They continued doing all the sins of the northern kingdom, and in fact, were doing them even worse than they had done. In Habakkuk's day, people openly worshiped false gods. They would worship these false gods without worrying about who would see them, and yet they thought they were still serving God at the same time. In Habakkuk's day, people were putting idols and pagan altars inside the temple itself, the very place where God commanded his people to worship him. That's where they were worshipping these false gods instead. In Habakkuk's day, leaders were worshipping idols inside dark rooms in the temple. The very worst of the idolatry was hidden away in the temple itself. In Habakkuk's day, people were cheating their neighbors. They were mistreating the poor. They were doing everything they could to gain an advantage over their neighbor. And yet they still thought that they were serving God. And in Habakkuk's day, even though King Josiah had been a good king, his sons were only interested in getting money and power for themselves rather than doing their jobs. It was a very difficult time that Habakkuk was living in, one where it would be very difficult to see how he could give thanks.

And so when Habakkuk cries out to the Lord, the Lord answers him, chapter 1, verses 5 and 6: "Look among the nations and see; wonder and be astounded! For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own." God has told Habakkuk that in his days, he would raise up the Chaldeans, who we call the Babylonians, to come and to destroy the southern kingdom. Habakkuk would see with his own eyes the fall of Judah. Habakkuk would see in his own lifetime Judah being punished for their sins. And this invasion, this destruction, this exile was all soon to happen. So it'd be very easy to wonder in the middle of all of that: what is there to possibly give thanks for?

And Christians, we can probably sympathize with Habakkuk when he says in chapter 1, verse 2: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you 'Violence!', and you will not save?" Because in the middle of hard times, it can seem like God is far off, like he's not listening to us. He's not paying attention to us. And that can leave us wondering how we can give thanks. During the drought this past year, it's been hard on all of us. Yes, it got better towards the end. We got a little bit more rain later in the year. But our crops were certainly not up to our expectations. And the hay crop was also far below what we wanted. I'm sure there are many of you who have had to sell cattle just to be able to take care of the ones you still have when it comes to this winter. All of these things can leave us wondering: what is there to give thanks for when things are so tough?

In the middle of our national problems, we see deep divisions that have caused even friends and family to be at war with each other, to be at each other's throats, to be hostile towards one another. And our leaders in this country, just like in Habakkuk's day, seem to be more interested in getting power and money for themselves than in doing their jobs. In the face of that we can wonder: what is there to give thanks for?

Or in the face of economic problems, we have a supply chain which is breaking down, so that is getting harder and harder to get even basic things, to get the things that we need. And with inflation going up and up, the value of the dollar is going further and further down, so prices are going out of control. And when we're faced with that reality, that can also leave us wondering: what is there to give thanks for in the face of such hardship? Out of all of these issues, Christians, and whatever the issue may be--it could be something other than this too--hard times always make it seem hard to give thanks to God. Because we wonder: what is there to give thanks for?

And yet Habakkuk could still say in our reading for today: "Though the fig tree should not blossom nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength. He makes my feet like the deer's. He makes me tread on my high places." Now, pay attention to what he says here. He's saying even if things were to get worse, even if there was no harvest whatsoever--there was no olives on the trees and the fields failed completely--or even if it was all destroyed by the Babylonians, yet he could still praise the Lord. He could still give thanks to the God of his salvation. Habakkuk could lose everything, and yet still give thanks to God.

Why? We might ask. How can he do this? Because he knew, Christians, that God is not going to forget his people. God has made a promise to them to take care of them, and he will not fail to keep that promise. Habakkuk knew that God would give them victory even over the Babylonians, that all of these things they were going through right now would come to an end. And Habakkuk knew that God was his strength, even in the midst of hard times. So that he knew that God would never let the righteous fall. They could turn to him and find safety, find security in the Lord. So yes, Habakkuk could give thanks even if everything else was gone, because he knew that God is faithful.

So Christians, even in our hard times, we can give thanks to God just like Habakkuk. No matter how hard it may seem to be to us, there is always something to give thanks for. In the midst of the drought, we can give thanks for the rain that we have received. God didn't give us nothing at all. He did give us some. And we can learn to appreciate that rain so much more, because we can see in it his mercy and how he cares for us and how much we need him. But even if it was worse than that, even if there was no rain whatsoever, so that the harvest completely failed, we could still give thanks, because we know that God has promised to take care of us. And he will keep that promise, even if we can't quite see how.

In a time of national problems, we can give thanks that God has promised to deliver us from these things. These things will not go on forever. God may very well even raise up somebody to

take care of it, to bring us back to normal. But even if things get worse, if the divisions get deeper and even if this nation were to fall, we could still give thanks to God. Because even if everything else was gone, his salvation remains. Nations rise. Nations fall. But the Church of Jesus Christ goes on forever. That will never change.

And in the midst of economic troubles, we can give thanks for the things which we do have. Instead of focusing so much on what we don't have, we can see what God has already given to us and give thanks for those things. But even if it was all gone, even if we had nothing whatsoever, we could still give thanks. Because we could lose it all and yet lose nothing at all, because we have Jesus Christ. God has promised to you salvation, Christians, through his Son. And that salvation is yours. No matter what we lose in this life, that will not change. And we can give thanks for that. As Luther says in the hymn "A Mighty Fortress": "And take they our life, / Goods, fame, child, and wife, / Let these all be gone. / They yet have nothing won. / The kingdom ours remaineth." The kingdom is ours, Christians, and as long as we have that, we are richer than any kings.

So let us rejoice in the Lord. Let us give thanks to the God of our salvation. Because God is our strength. God is our Savior. God is our loving Father. And that is something that is always worth giving thanks for. Let us give thanks to God on this Thanksgiving Day, because we have everything in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us all good things in your Son, Jesus Christ. We pray that you would lead us always to give thanks to you for all that you have done, knowing that you will take care of us always in Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.