

THANKSGIVING VESPERS

O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endures forever.

Most of you know it by heart. Most of you say it daily. Many of you can say it without even thinking. Many of you can speak it faster than an eye can blink. Most of you will say it with loved ones tomorrow. All of us will contemplate it today. “*O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endures forever.*” This prayer is an almost continuous refrain throughout the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms.

This prayer appears in several different contexts. It is sung when remembering God’s many gifts in the past (e.g. Psalm 136). Today, as we celebrate Thanksgiving and bring the church year to an end, we appropriately remember God’s gifts in the past, especially the past year. No matter what worries we entered the year with, we are still here, and most of us are still better off than the majority of the world’s citizens. The Lord has *Given us this day our daily bread* and significantly more. As the Small Catechism reminds us, He has given us *food and drink, clothing and shoes, house and home, land, money and goods, godly spouses and children, faithful leaders, good government, good weather, peace and order, health, a good name, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like*. While our sinful nature cries out for more and assures us things could always be better, how can we not give thanks to God for the many blessings we’ve received from His hands.

This prayer also is spoken when recalling the Lord’s protection (e.g. Psalm 107). How can we not marvel at His protection in the past year? In a day and age when unfathomable destruction can be done by so few perpetrators and with so few materials, God has kept us safe at home and gifted us with brave men and women to serve for our security abroad. The more I consider all the things that could go wrong each day, the more I marvel at how God has been our shield, even though our nation has not deserved it.

This prayer is sung when looking with hope to the future (e.g. 1 Chronicles 16). Our future may indeed look bleak at times—for instance, our synod has serious budget problems and our culture seems increasingly hostile to the faith—yet when we consider the manifold blessings that God has preserved for us, even in these oftentimes troubling times, we can have little doubt that He will be with us in the years to come. God has a history of doing the most amazing things at the most unlikely times, in the most unpredictable ways. How can we not look with eager expectation for His next big thing, and to the second coming of His beloved Son, our Savior. We can say with St. Paul, “*If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*”

Most importantly, this refrain is sung in Psalm 118, a great Messianic Psalm, and rightly so, because nowhere are these words more appropriate than when considering the sacrifice of God’s only Son. Nothing else in all the world deserves of our thanks more than the free and undeserved gift of God’s Son. That is why we sing these words after receiving the Sacrament in the Common Service, when we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. No matter what happens in the coming year, no matter what we think we have lacked in the past year, in Christ we have never and will never lack what matters most: forgiveness, life, and salvation.

As you stuff your belly with turkey tomorrow, and watch the Lions get stuffed, take time to remember the blessings of the past and to look to the future with hope. Most importantly, however, give thanks to God for His ultimate goodness and mercy, incarnate in Christ. Hear the words of David and see their fulfillment in our Lord:

The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: “The LORD’s right hand has done mighty things! The LORD’s right hand is lifted high; the LORD’s right hand has done mighty things!” I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done. The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death. Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter. I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation. The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you. The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. (Psalm 118:14-29)