

“THANKFUL? OF COURSE!”

“Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving.”

Psalm 147:7

Ebola. ISIS. Political and economic upheaval. Disasters. Death. With so many frightening things going on in the world, and in our own country, can we really be thankful this Thanksgiving Day? Of course! Let me share a true story with you.

Most of us know that wonderful Lutheran hymn, “Now Thank We All Our God.” Many would think it was composed in a nice, quiet, safe pastor’s study, where everything was comfortable and “orderly.” The truth is just the opposite.

It was composed in the 1600’s by a Lutheran pastor, the Rev. Martin Rinkhart, during “The Thirty Years War.” During that time, he and his people suffered some of the most severe hardships imaginable. His church was located in the walled city of Eilenberg, which became tremendously overcrowded with refugees from the war and, over many years, suffered waves of disease and famine, even while various armies marched through the city leaving death and destruction in their wake.

Pastor Rinkhart’s home served as a refuge for the afflicted victims, even though he had difficulty providing food and clothing for his own family. The plague of 1637 was so severe that, at its height, Rinkhart was the only remaining pastor in the city, conducting as many as forty to fifty funerals a day!

Yet, in the midst of all that sorrow and death, he wrote this hymn. How was that possible? Because he had faith that, even in the midst of all that tragedy and death, God had not abandoned His people. After all, He sent His Son into this sin-sick world, brought about redemption for sinners by His shed blood on the cross, and defeated death by His resurrection. By fixing his eyes on Jesus, Rinkhart was able to look beyond his present suffering and turmoil to those eternal truths that are in Christ, and in the confident hope that “death is swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15).” Frankly, that is also how we can be thankful even in the midst of our sorrows. Knowing the “back story” of this hymn, we would do well to consider what it says as we experience our own difficult days.

The first stanza of this hymn expresses gratitude to God for His “countless gifts of Love.” The second stanza prays for God’s continued care and keeping, even while hinting at Rinkhart’s own personal hardships: “Guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills.” And the final stanza is a doxology of praise to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – “the one eternal God.”

Indeed, even as we Christians experience much anxiety and sorrow in this fallen world, there is much for which to be thankful. Though material things may be lacking, and loved ones no longer with us, we have Christ. We have God’s Word. We have the forgiveness of all our sins because of Jesus. And we have the confident assurance that “neither death nor life, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord (Rom. 8).” Indeed, “Now Thank We All Our God!”

Happy Thanksgiving and God bless you!