

**THANKSGIVING DAY:****“Yet I Will Rejoice in the Lord”****Habakkuk 3:17-19**

*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, <sup>18</sup> yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. <sup>19</sup> GOD, the Lord, is my strength; He makes my feet like the deer's; He makes me tread on my high places.*

Thanksgiving is the time that we as a nation celebrate the blessings and good things of this past year. For example, the health and well-being of our people. Well, not so much with a deadly pandemic afflicting our country. Then there is our stable and prosperous economy. Again, not so much with forced shutdowns of businesses causing layoffs and closures. At least we witnessed the smooth exercise of democracy in our recent election. No, not that either, but we can be thankful that the campaign advertisements are finished. Closer to home, we can remember all those Cardinals' baseball wins we were able to watch at Busch Stadium. Whoops, their year was pretty much a wash-out too, wasn't it? How about the harvests of our fields? At least there is something that went well. After all, the origin of this Thanksgiving holiday is in the bounty of harvested crops.

But our passage from prophet Habakkuk describes a disastrous harvest year. There are no figs to be found, no grapes to gather, and no olives to obtain. The fields have failed, the flocks have fled and there is nothing to be heard from the herds. Just think of the worst possible year ever for our local farmers. There would be no crops at all to harvest. Thanks to heat and lack of rain the wheat withered, the corn cooked, and the beans baked. Cows stopped giving milk. There were no hogs to take to market and no cattle to sell.

We might think that the agricultural disaster Habakkuk writes of is weather related, that no rain has caused a great drought. Or perhaps it is some type of pest, maybe locusts have devoured the land. But instead it was an enemy, the Babylonian army. Habakkuk is a spokesman of God around 600 BC, during the last decades of the nation of Judah. He is unique among the Old Testament Minor Prophets. His message is not so much from God to the people (as I am speaking to you), but from the people to God (turn the other way). And it is very simply the word, “Why?” Why has the

covenant God allowed a pagan people, an idol-worshipping nation to oppress His chosen children? Their complaint was that either God has forsaken, given up, on the land of Judah or He has lost control of the situation and is powerless to help them. Life looks very bad to Habakkuk and his fellow Judeans. And it is bad. They are suffering from the results of their own idolatry. It is not that God has turned His back on them. They have turned their backs on Him.

Thus, the first word of verse 18 is so very important, “yet.” This is the stance of faith knowing that there is good still to come. This is the confidence of a believer who will not let go of God that easily or quickly. This is the attitude of three young men named Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who, when faced with the fate of a fiery furnace, prefer faith in the God they serve rather than fall face down before Babylon’s false gods in worship, even if their God chooses not to rescue them from that furnace of death.

This “yet” is also the obedience of an eternal Son both divine and human who knows the suffering He is about to endure and the pain of death He is about to experience. While praying in agony for another way to fulfill His Father’s mission on earth, He says, “not My will but Yours be done,” the will of winning His sinful people’s forgiveness and salvation.

Dr. Dale Meyer, recently retired president of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, tells the story of getting on a plane dressed in his clergy shirt and having the person sitting next to him say, “now I know that God won’t let this plane crash.” Dr. Meyer responded, “Don’t be so sure. Perhaps that will be God’s way of taking me out of this life.”

“Yet I will rejoice in the Lord” is the confidence of a thankful prophet of God. Joy is quite different from happiness. Happiness requires good times, sunny days, a full tummy and fuller wallet. Joy, however, does not rely upon the circumstances of this life. Joy comes from the relationships that we have. Happiness at Thanksgiving comes from the food that is on the table. Joy on this day is in the people who are seated around that table. We find happiness in the blessings that we receive from God. We have joy in the God who gives us those blessings. We rejoice in the Lord because He claims us as His chosen children in our holy baptism, blesses us with the revelation of Himself in the Bible,

and strengthens us for new life with the sacramental body and blood of our Savior Jesus Christ present for us in this Lord's Supper.

“I will take joy in the God of my salvation.” In Jesus Christ we have the God who has given Himself for us, who has lived in our place perfectly, who has died on our behalf sacrificially, who has risen for our resurrection eternally. This is the God who saves us from our sins, who rescues us from our death, and who delivers us from the clutches of the devil. He is the source and giver of a salvation that is already accomplished for us and personally owned now by us. Our God of salvation is on our side, so that we are safe in the midst of all our enemies. We will enjoy the fulness of true and eternal life won for us by our suffering Savior, earned for us by our dying Redeemer and prepared for us by our living Lord.

This God is the source of our strength so that we, in dark and difficult days, can live by faith and not in fear. We can live a life of freedom in joy instead of existing in panic at a pandemic. When we look to ourselves and our own human reason and strength we will end up in despair and depression. But when we realize that all we have left is the Lord, then we will learn that the Lord is all we need.

“He makes my feet like the deer's.” So soon after deer hunting weekend this might not be the most pleasant image of God's goodness to us for us to consider. Some of you hear the word “deer” and you are thinking of what you want to see in the crosshairs of your shotgun scope. But for Habakkuk the feet of a deer are strong and sturdy, quick and nimble. God gives us such feet of faith that do not falter but are able to climb up from the valley of our affliction, trouble and death to the secure, strong and fortified heights of God's salvation, joy and life.

There are 4 Fs to this Thanksgiving holiday; food, family and football are the first three. Sadly, too many people stop there and miss out on the most important one of all, that is faith. But 600 years before our heavenly Father fulfilled His promise of a Messiah, the Christ, a little known and oddly named spokesman of God, Habakkuk, taught us that “the righteous shall live by faith.” So when we are burdened by life in this sinful and rebellious world, we can join with this prophet in confessing, “I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.” Amen