

Gratitude in Hard Times

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Welcome, once again, to worship. Whether you are here or following us online, it is good to be together now, during these days of our Lenten season. It is also good to be together because—with all that has been in the news that has sort of washed over us (no matter how you get your information or what kind of media is your outlet and to the world)—it has been a confusing, testing, and trying time, has it not? The news from Ukraine and all that is happening in Eastern Europe, to places throughout the world that are being affected economically by kind of the upset and the turmoil of different markets.

I guess we were just sort of resigned here at the church this past week, because we've been trying to find King's Hawaiian bread, and it's nowhere to be found. It's just one of those little ongoing sorts of signs that supply chains are still out of whack.

Remember at the beginning of the pandemic when we couldn't get toilet paper or Clorox wipes? Those are the little things that tell you that that sort of the world is out of whack right now.

It feels like I'm in this kind of gray, shapeless, formless place without any distinct landmarks. For me, it's kind of an echo of Jesus being out in the desert places, where the sky and the ground sort of merge into this one open, vast, shapeless expanse. A place where you get disoriented and are easily tempted.

There's another place where I found myself in a kind of gray shapeless void. It was in the fourth grade, and I had been

playing in the backyard of the home in which I grew up. I was playing on a rope swing that was hanging from one of our large trees in the back. I remember it was a sunny afternoon after school. I was just enjoying the freedom of a few hours between school and dinner, and suddenly—as I was swinging back and forth, going higher and higher—I found myself floating untethered through the air. And then as my head swung down, and I looked up at the sky; it was no longer blue. It was my shoes that were up above my head! I knew something was not right, and I should be very afraid.

The next thing I knew I was in that gray world: no color, nothing definitive like a tree or the grass. What I heard was a distant voice, I think, calling my name. As I tried to focus in on it, it seemed to be pulling me out of that gray, shapeless place into a place filled with light and color. It was almost like I was traveling down a tube back into the normal world of a fourth grader, kind of being pulled from a place of fear back into relationship with what is normal. And it was the voice of my mom.

Chuck, are you okay? Are you okay? Opening my eyes, I found myself staring up into her face. It was only then that I began to realize what had happened: the rope from the rope swing had broken, and it had sent me flying through the sky, ultimately to land on my head. I know many of you think I'm pretty thick headed, but I can still get injured.

Soon there was the voice of sirens coming up our street, and I was whisked away in an ambulance to the hospital. But it was that voice of my mom, someone whom I trusted that brought me

back into a sort of relationship with what is normal. I mentioned this story because if you at all feel like you have fears or frustrations about the of life right now—because of the news or what is going on with the pandemic or our economy—it can feel like you are in this gray shapeless place. The place of wilderness wanderings, where temptations come easy. Who is your voice? It's there, I know it is. To whom do you listen to help guide you, call you, draw you back into real life and out of places of fear and testing.

I was sitting few years later, bobbing up and down in the front of a Gillnet boat on the Columbia River. And behind me, a voice was shouting out: the voice of an old rough and tumbled fisherman who had gillnetted the Colombia for many decades. As my friend, Alex and I had sat in the front of the boat, his voice rang out: *Don't worry, boys we'll make it through this!*

He probably saw that were grabbing hold with sort of white bare knuckles on the little plank were sitting on at the front of the boat. I mean, the Columbia was as calm and flat as it could be, but were just kids, one of our first times out on the river. But I remember that voice. It was confidence building.

It was like: *This is going to be okay. I'm going to make it through this.*

And there, bouncing up and down, it became sort of an adventure instead of something to be feared. We stopped in a shallow bay where the old gnarly fisherman was going to pick up his gillnet and see what it had caught. As he pulled the net in, and as we watched with anticipation for a huge catch to be

brought into the boat, there was nothing in that gillnet that day. And I thought to myself, even at that young age, how disappointing, how fickle this world can be with the gifts it gives.

It sort of reminds me once again of that gray shapeless formless place where, when your expectations are not met, you begin to mistrust that this world really is filled with a gracious abundance. You begin to put your trust in other things: anything from your own abilities to ill-gotten gains

After a less than abundant harvest—I think there might've been one or two salmon in the net—we made our way back to the dock. We just kind of looked at the fisherman and he said, *Boys, look what I have. I have a boat that was my father's, the wind in my face, the beauty of the day, the water under the boat, and two salmon.* Salmon which he didn't sell. He took one home for dinner and one to give to a friend. *How much I really have,* he said.

It's amazing. With just a word, my whole appreciation for that day changed. Listening to him tell his family story of growing up on the river and fishing with his father, and his grandfather before him. It made me remember how truly blessed we are, especially when we tell each other the stories of the blessings that have been given to us. Sort of like the reading that Jonathan did from Deuteronomy: the remembering of the story of how God's people had been brought down into Egypt and there, they lived as aliens but grew in number and prosperity. They were treated harshly, and there was hard labor imposed upon them, but they told the story of how they cried out to the Lord. The

Lord heard the voice, saw the affliction, their toil, and their oppression.

And so God brought them out with a mighty outstretched hand, and with terrifying displays of power God brought them out to a place of safety, a land flowing with milk and honey. A story God's people told that—in the difficulties of being God's people in the promised land—would draw them out of their gray, formless, shapeless times back into the reality of what God gives, which is abundant bounty. When we hear the stories, those are the times that we begin to be reoriented, because—whether they be our family stories or the scripture stories—God has done all these things.

Now we set aside a little bit of an offering, like a fisherman with two fish. Because God has done all these things for us, we live a life of gratitude and celebration. We live with one another and with God, trusting in God. Not in order to get stuff, but because of all that we have already received.

Have you ever been in that place in your life where all of a sudden it dawns on you that life isn't empty but it's full? That life isn't all toil and tribulation, but it's actually joy and celebration? Have you ever been in that place where, even in the hard times, all of a sudden you look up and you go, *You know what? In the midst of these struggles, I really have a lot.* Anne brought us a word about that from Central America not too many weeks ago. Sometimes we experience when people have the least that they recognize that they have the most.

What is it? What gets people into that place, as followers of God? Psalm 91 talks about trusting God, and I always ask myself, *why trust God?* Why? Do you trust God? Do you? Do I? Think about this for a second. When life gets a little tough, where do you begin to put your trust: in yourself or in God? For me, it's really easy to go to that place of *I'm going to pull myself out of this. I'm going to listen to my own voice and, by the strength of my own arms or legs, I'm going to make things better.*

What tempts you place your trust in those things that are other than God? What tempts you? The Psalmist calls us out of that temptation, back into a trust of God. *God will give angels charge over you to guard you, to always bear you up; to give you such a sense of competence and a place of a power that none of the things in this world really are threats to you, and we'll end up giving thanks to God.*

Have you ever listened to a couple that's been married like 40, 50, 60 years? Okay, I know some of you are looking at me like, *well, I'm that couple!* Or, one of the things I've always noticed as a pastor as I sit and have coffee with older couples, who've been together for a while, is they're always telling stories about their life together. You know, it always starts out like, *Do you remember that one time when...* and they start laughing or crying or they start arguing? *No, it didn't happen quite that way!* Have you ever been there and heard those stories? What those stories do is reaffirm for that couple their ability to have trust in one another. To live in relationship. They rehearse the stories because it's what makes up their relationship with one another.

Couples who've been together for 60 years do it. Those of us who have been in the faith—whether it's just one year or 80—we tell the stories of our relationship with God. We tell them in order to reaffirm that God is faithful and trustworthy. In fact, I think the outcome of a journey of faith is just to grow old with God and just be an old couple together: fighting, bickering, not quite remembering everything correctly, but loving one another in the midst of it all.

Sharing those stories of love, which is something that's not transactional. It's relational. Those stories an older couple shares, or that people of faith share with one another, aren't if-then stories. If you do this for me, then I'll do this for you. No, they're relational stories, because we love one another. This is what happened. The thing about Jesus being tempted by Satan, these are all transactional temptations. Satan coming along, going, *Jesus if you really are this, then I will. Or Jesus, if you do this, then I will. If you are the son of God, then God will.* Satan is tempting Jesus to live *not* in relationship with God, but by what he can get from either Satan or God by fulfilling requirements.

I always wonder what it would sound like if the gospel writer or if Satan had approached Jesus differently saying, *Jesus, because you're the son of God; therefore, I know you could turn this stone to bread.* What a difference. Now Satan couldn't do it, but do you see the difference? Or *Because you are the son of God, I know God will take care of you if you throw yourself off this high place.* You sense the difference there. Again, Satan can't do it because Satan can't enter into a relationship with any

authenticity, with any depth. Jesus knew that, and so he didn't buy in to Satan's temptation.

I want to finish this day just by asking us to do this during Lent, because we are God's people and we have these stories. Let's share them with one another. Each week, Pastor Bridget and I will take some turns preaching and laying out some of the stories of these people of faith. And because we have these stories, we're able to just to rest in them. We're able to hear them pull us out of the gray, formless places into a place of real life in relationship with one another.

Think about one Bible story this week that really speaks to you. I want to ask you to do this: share it with me via email. In fact, share it with pastor Bridget, too. Share your favorite story of scripture. Share it with Pastor Susan, just email us. *This is my favorite scripture story, and when I hear it, this is how life opens up for me.* It is a beautiful Lenten discipline that we begin, to enter into the season together.

Thanks be to God. Amen.