

Psalm 136:1-9

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever.
O give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures for ever.
O give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures for ever;
who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures for ever;
who by understanding made the heavens, for his steadfast love endures for ever;
who spread out the earth on the waters, for his steadfast love endures for ever;
who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures for ever;
the sun to rule over the day, for his steadfast love endures for ever;
the moon and stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures for ever;

John 10:1-10

‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

The Burden of Our Abundance
Rev. Charles Schuster
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Sue Monk Kidd and her book *Firstlight*. “On one of those Decembers my daughter Ann was six. She tucked two gifts beneath the Christmas tree, one for her daddy and one for me. Christmas morning I opened my gift to find a pair of slightly familiar silver earrings, and her daddy’s package was a navy tie with ten little tan ducks on it. When I asked Ann where she found the gifts, she told me they were in a cedar chest in the attic. That’s when I recognized the earrings. I’d retired them about ten years ago, and the tie had been discarded about that time as well. Ann had given us gifts we already possessed. That incident opened me to consider how much my life was caught up in wanting, seeking and acquisition. Thanks to a six-year-old, I discovered the clean, simple wisdom of waking up to what I already had.”

This is a Sunday that isn’t always. I love it when it is. It’s the Sunday between Thanksgiving and Advent, and Advent is four weeks prior to Christmas. And I’d like us to find the wisdom of the six-year-old, and have us wake up to what we have. But to help us get there, I want us to look back to last Thursday. And then I want us to look ahead to next Sunday. Because if we look back, we’ll think about what we have, and if we look

ahead, we'll think about who we are. They call it Turkey Day – very strange, don't you think? That day of Thanksgiving, they called it Turkey Day, but probably most of us had turkey to eat. It was a time to think, a time to think about what we have. It was a time to stop thinking thin, for a number of reasons, and to start thinking thanks. The psalmist must have thought thanks was important, because it was repeated in the psalm. Probably the psalm, I'm guessing, was part of a worship service, and that was part of the responsive litany. "Thanks be to God, for God's steadfast love endures forever. Thanks be to God, for God's steadfast love endures forever." It might be that the psalmist put that in as part of the liturgy. It's also possible that the psalmist thought that that thought was so important that it was repeated frequently, to the point that perhaps people would get it.

I worked with a minister, and please understand that it's not anyone you know. Nobody I would describe has ever done this, but I worked with one about fifteen years ago and whenever he would preach, if he'd look out into the congregation like I'm looking at you and he'd get to the end of his sermon and he had the sense they weren't getting it, he'd start all over again. That was effective on a number of levels, but just as the congregation was led into great clarity, sometimes they drifted into a fairly high degree of hostility.

The point of the psalmist: think about what you have. Stop thinking thin, start thinking thanks. Thanks be to God for God's steadfast love endures forever. Turkey day, Thanksgiving Day, was a time to think thanks, to stop thinking thin. Through the ages, people have, I think, had this sort of tendency to think thin. That wonderful story in the Exodus, Moses and the people out in the middle of the wilderness, and the people saying to Moses, "What's the matter, Moses, didn't we have enough graves in Egypt, that you brought us out here to die?" The Back to Egypt committee was formed. And Jeremiah speaking to God: "Why must the way of the wicked prosper?" And God saying to Jeremiah, "You run with human beings and they weary you, what are you going to do when you have to run with horses?" And then the disciples, I don't know that it came this way, but it might have, the disciples saying to Jesus, "Look, Jesus, we don't have much faith. We only have faith the size of a mustard seed/ What in the world can we do?" And Jesus probably looked at them and said, "Well, you know, move mountains."

Turkey day, think thin, think thanks. Look at what we have. I confess that I've been thinking thin, lately. You look at your lot in life and you say, "Why me?" The surgically repaired shoulder, the braces I've had to wear, the physical therapists who push you right to the limit of your pain and then they say, "We'll take you a little further." Not to mention the inconvenience of asking someone to tie your shoes. I had to have someone put this robe on me this morning. Had to have Gary move the notes around because I hadn't figured out how to get my other hand through this thing. Can't tie a necktie. Buford Plemmons, a member of the congregation, gave me these snap-on neckties. Shaking hands with the wrong hand, it's just wrong. Trying to shave your face with a razor blade left-handed when you're right-handed is dangerous, which has been proven a number of times. I've had a dose of thinking thin. Why me, I wonder?

Sunday two weeks ago I was making my way out of the chapel, down this hallway here, past the offices, down the hallway, the choir's lined up out there, the adult choir. Now,

we go back four and a half years, that choir and I, four and a half years. Now, I consider baiting them to be sport. They, probably many of them who were in the choir at the time, will remember the Christmas Eve sermon I preached entitled, "Our Choir Can't Sing a Note," where I suggested that the soprano section was squawking like buzzards on a carcass, that the alto section was out to lunch, that the tenors were too timid and that the bass section was bulimic. They took it personally. For any preacher to walk through that group is dangerous at best, and in my case, you expect to take abuse, and I did, and I deserved it. I'm glad most of them aren't here today. Got to the end of the narrow hall and the door, that door there. It was closed, and I asked a choir member to hold my books and notes, because I had my notes and I had a Bible so I could open the door and get out of there, and he said, "I really can't." It was then that I realized that I had just asked a man who has only one arm, and his one arm was full of the choir folder because his arm had been amputated, and I asked him to hold my books. I apologized. I know just a little, in the last four weeks, what is for him full-time. His name is Kurt. He's here. We've communicated, this past week. He's given me permission to do what I'm about to do. He knows what it is. He thinks thanks. I think thin.

It was almost twenty years ago. It was a cutting press, family business. It fell. It crushed his rib cage and severed his arm. What followed: unconsciousness, surgery, a breathing machine, months of rehabilitation, doctors telling him "You'll never fish again, Kurt. You'll never climb mountains again. We're limiting you to 7,000 feet." So much he would never do again. Kurt met people in rehab, brave people, burn patients, cancer patients, MS patients. One of his nurses, Carol, is now his wife. They've been married nineteen years. Yesterday was their anniversary. He will never forget Burns United Methodist Church in Aurora. I know that church very well, I served Montclair, which is just down the road from it. He will never forget how they took up donating blood on his behalf. He will never forget the outpouring of love from friends and family. He says it this way, he says, "To my amazement, I realized people want to help and there's a tremendous amount of good that's in the world. Simple things, like helping me zip up a coat or a choir member saying, "Would you like to sing from my hymnal. Prior to the accident I did not know this, I always sensed that there was good in the world, but the dark side of life seemed to far outweigh anything positive that happened. I know differently now. Even when confronted with the toughest challenges, even when things seem like they can't get worse, the human spirit still shines brightly. Carol and I are in the midst of raising two wonderful teenagers. I have climbed mountains they said I couldn't climb, fourteeners. I can fly fish with one hand, and I catch fish, too. I've done many things they said I couldn't do. I teach classes at CSU. I have a PhD which I got after the injury. I have a life. It's a wonderful life. Someone asked me if I would trade my current situation for a left arm. It's a fair question. Fortunately, I don't have to answer it, but I probably wouldn't. In other words," Kurt said, "I feel blessed with the life that God has given me." He thinks thanks. He knows what he has. Thanks be to God for God's steadfast love endures forever. Turkey day, Thanksgiving, a time to think thanks, a time to think about what we have. Turkey day helps us think about what we have so that we are not burdened by our abundance, so that we realize we're blessed by it. Turkey day, last Thursday, looking back.

Next I want us to look ahead to next Sunday. Next Sunday we will begin to think about not what we've had, but who we are. Thanksgiving is over, turkey day is past. Black Friday shopping, open at four AM, some of the stores. Were you out there, did you get some things? Giving back, making thanks? Next Sunday is the time we think about who we are. Who are we? Advent, the coming of the Christ child, the Christ child Jesus who said "I've come that you might have abundant life." So important is that text, the Christ child came, Advent, the coming, that we might have abundant life. The coming of the Christ child helps us think about who we are.

It's a silly story. I don't know if it's true, probably not. An old farmer and his wife lived in the hills, never got to the city. He said to her one day, "You know, we've just got to go to town once before we die," and so they went. They went to town and to a nice hotel, they were going to spend the night. Neither of them had seen a hotel before. They stepped into the lobby and stood next to the elevator. The door opened. The woman, being faster, stepped in to see what was going on in there, and suddenly the door shut. Forty-five seconds later the door re-opened and out stepped a beautiful young woman. And the old farmer went up to her and hugged her and said to her, "Ma, I don't know where you've been and I don't know what you did, but we ought to have come to town much sooner."

We ought to come to know who we are. Maybe there's beauty he would see if he looked. Maybe there's beauty in him that she could see if she looked again. There's beauty in us. Who are we? Advent reminds us it's a time to think about who we are, and who we are is defined by the child born in Bethlehem. That's what Advent reminds us. God with us, like Christ is with us, a new way to think about God, that's what's coming. This is a God who does not demand that we prove ourselves. This is a God who is hoping that we will express the best that is in ourselves, through this child. This is a God who does not want us to be saved from life into something else, this is the God who wants to save us from something less than life, to abundant life. This is a God who is not bent on hurting us when we sin, this is a God who is present to help us rise up to the greatness that God knows is in us. This is the God of love not force. This is the God of grace, it's Emmanuel, it's God with us, the child in Bethlehem.

Karen Armstrong has some thoughts about different world religions, including ours, in her book *The Great Transformation*. She reminds us who we are as Christians when she says, "The Gospels do not present Jesus as teaching doctrines. Instead they show him as practicing concern for everybody." And she said people who would be his followers shouldn't judge others. People who would be admitted to his kingdom would be those who practice practical compassion, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned. His followers give their wealth to the poor. They should not trumpet their own good deeds. They live gentle, self-effacing lives. When he was arrested, he would not let his followers fight on his behalf, and when he died, he died forgiving his executioners.

It's been interesting, don't you think, over the past several weeks, the debate the city has had over the Christmas display downtown. It's been interesting listening to the arguments of the City Council last Tuesday. They had them on TV, you know, we got to watch. It was entertaining and profound. One man that all the news stations seemed to report was

the guy who stood up and said, “I don’t understand what it means to celebrate winter, to turn out town display into a celebration of winter. I don’t celebrate winter, I tolerate it. I celebrate Christmas.” One of the things I noticed, as people got up to speak, was a number of folks claimed to think it was true, and I think they’re right, this is a town where most of the people in it are Christian. I don’t know what the percentage is, but I’m guessing that’s somewhat true. And if that is true, then that’s how we’ll want to act. If most of us in this town are Christian, they we’re called to act like it. I think the Council made a fairly good decision, as a start. I think a good decision to celebrate the birth of Jesus calls for us to enlarge and expand our celebration. It’s not a compromise, it’s a celebration of Christ’s likeness. It doesn’t require a protest that demands our continued thought to see how our celebration can push our limits. As we attack others in their faith, for daring to want to celebrate their faith, in our time, if it is, but it does push us to consider what our limits are, and push those limits beyond perhaps what we think. And an openness to other people of faith. That’s what Jesus would have done, I’m convinced. That’s what abundant life is about. It means that we are secure enough in our faith that we are prepared to celebrate others as they celebrate their faith, even at Christmas. It means the God of goodness brings mercy to a world that is uptight. It means glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will to all people, and it is to all people that God is well pleased. That’s what abundant life means. It seems to me that’s what Emmanuel calls for, God with us.

The people who will be admitted, Karen Armstrong said, as followers of Jesus, are the ones who practice practical compassion. We as Christians in the celebration of Jesus’ birth do not call for the disrespecting of other traditions. It does not authorize us to neglect what it means to be indifferent to others in their statements of faith or even in their skepticism about our faith. Since it is the Advent of Jesus’ birth that we await, there must be concern for all people, not just because we wish to be politically correct, but because we need to be Christianly consistent. Abundant life that he came to bring means that we take our tradition and enlarge it and expand it.

It was Reinhold Niebuhr who said that the way of the cross means we carry a cross in order to find victory over the cross. It means we take on hard things. It’s a new way of relating to God. God with us, cribbed in a manger, cabined in a town that had no room, threatened by the power of force, challenged to be the Prince of Peace, destined to reveal the God of love. It’s who we are, and if this town is dominated by Christian people, then we Christian people think about that for the next four weeks. We think about how we live and how we give. We think about distant wars and how we stand. We think about human need and putting away human greed. We think about our relationships, those that are broken and those that are whole, and we forgive if we can. Advent is coming, Christmas eve, Christian people, a time to think about who we are and live like it. What do we have? We have enough to be thankful, if we look back to turkey day. And who are we? We’re Christian. If we look ahead to Advent, we learn what that means. On the Sunday between Christmas, Advent and Thanksgiving, a six-year old – God often uses six-year-olds to remind you about abundant life – and when God gets really desperate, God will use other means, even a preacher, to remind you and me of the abundant life Jesus came to give us. Let us pray.

In the days to come, when we are confused about many things, help us, O God, to listen to your wisdom as it comes through children. Amen.