

God is Good – Always

PSALM 107:1

Dr. C. George Fry
Fairfield Parish
Lancaster, Ohio

A Thanksgiving Sermon

TEXT: “O GIVE THANKS UNTO THE LORD, FOR HE IS GOOD, FOR HIS MERCY ENDURETH FOREVER.” PSALM 107:1 AV

Six years ago during spring break I took several students to a Christian leadership conference sponsored by Senator Dan Coats. There were people from about every campus in Indiana and from about every denominational persuasion. Of the many fabulous speakers, one stood out. A big black man, he was chaplain for the Indianapolis Colts. His Sunday sermon recounted many terrible things – born fatherless, raised poor, barely escaping prison, coming to Christ just in the nick of time. All listening had teared up. Then came his testimony: “I have learned that God is good – *always*.”

God is good – *always*

We need to hear that.

Why?

Because the *times* are not always good.

Aesop knew that. He told a tale of two sisters, twins, named Joy and Sorrow. Always they quarreled as to “which one should have the preference.” Unable to settle it, they went to King Minos. Minos tried everything to “make them agree and go hand in hand together as loving sisters.” No success. Minos finally settled it this way. Joy and Sorrow were chained together and “forever” each of them “In turn should be perpetually treading upon the heel of the other.”¹

Oliver Goldsmith told the tale, drawing this moral, “good and ill fortune do as naturally succeed one another as day and night.”²

That’s how it is. The good and the bad, alternating, just like the left and the right or sunshine and showers. Old timers in the room are nodding. They remember. The “Boom” of the Twenties, the “Bust” of the Thirties, or “World War” in the Forties, “World Peace” in the Fifties, or “Reform” in the Sixties, “Reaction” in the Seventies. Our Days are checkered. So how dare we say that “God is good – always?” Yes, I can thank God for prosperity but not for adversity.

Let me address that issue today.

For we are, in the words of the Communion Liturgy, “at all times, and in all places, (to) give thanks unto thee, O Lord, Holy Father...”³

A Time of Adversity

The hard part of the text first.

God is good always, *even in time of adversity*.

For some, 2002 was a hard year. It brought sickness and death, heartbreak and distress. As one student told me Monday, "I just want to get the damned thing over." That bad!

Larry would agree. You'd never guess he was eighty-two. Dapper and dashing, he still works as a lawyer. Every day. A devout Christian, Larry acts half his age. One Saturday evening I ran into Larry. "Reverend, do you drink?" he asked. I instantly knew he didn't mean Diet Pepsi. "Yes, sir," I replied, "I was ordained Lutheran, wasn't I?" We ended up in Kaufman's. Over a cocktail, the sad story unfolded. Larry's first wife had been a keeper – lovely, gracious, sagacious. They had forty years of bliss, then ten years of hell. "Alzheimer's," he explained. "I finally had to put her into a nursing home," he cried. Weeping, he added, "I'd go, every day to see her, and she'd ask, 'Who is that man?'" Mercifully she died. Our eighty-year old widower met a sixty-nine-year-old widow. Those two gray panthers staged Romeo and Juliet. Whirlwind courtship. Larry glowed as he described his Mary as a keeper – lovely, gracious, sagacious. Then the tears revealed the tears in his heart. "We were married only a year. She was the one who had the heart attack!" A long pause ended with this question. "George, why didn't I die, not her? Why does God make me go through being a widower twice? It isn't fair."

No, it isn't. Life isn't fair.

But God is good – always. Though he does not promote adversity, he permits it. C.S. Lewis, who lost his wife to cancer, wrote, "God whispers in our pleasures...but shouts in our pains."

There is a severe mercy in adversity.

In part it is a *matter of teaching*. Through pain can come again. Robert Browning Hamilton put it this way:

I walked a mile with Pleasure
She chattered all the way
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow
And ne'er a word said she
But oh the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me.⁴

Hamilton's right. At noon I see only single sun, but at midnight several millions. Only in the darkness is the Big Dipper visible. Some lessons are taught exclusively in God's Night School. Thank him for adversity – for he is good, always.

In part it is a *matter of testing*. Do I appreciate a meal more when I am empty or full? Often joy delayed is pleasure enhanced. How much do you want something? Wait and see. Patrick Dennis lived five years through fifteen rejections before *Auntie Mame* was published. Irving Stone endured seventeen refusals before *Lust for Life* was printed. Pearl Buck experienced twelve returns before *The Good Earth* was accepted. But, as Jackie Gleason said, at the happy ending of a "Honey-mooners" skit, "How sweet it is." Some lessons are learned only in a holding pattern, so thank him for adversity, for he is good, always.

In part it is a *matter of directing*. Sometimes dead ends give live options. The detour becomes the fast lane. Loyola became a saint, not a soldier – because of a broken leg. Elizabeth Browning became a poet, not a debutante – because of an injured spine. Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott became authors – because of lameness. Franklin D. Roosevelt didn't walk to the White House, he wheeled himself there – four times – because of polio. Josiah Wedgewood turned to making china – because of a leg amputation. Blessed adversities. Without Paul's thorn would we have Romans or I Corinthians? The pure poetry of Paul's "Ode to Love" makes his pain eternally profitable. Without a cross, Jesus would have been a major philosopher; but through it, he became the world's Savior. Some lessons are directional signals, seen only on the detour. Thank God for adversity, for he is good, always.

It is always a *matter of training*, in faith. Faith is trusting God. By it we live. By it we die. It is the only thing we can take with us. Not health, or wealth, or fame, or fortune, or friends, or even our family. Faith saves. And it is learned in the School of Adversity. Martin Rinkart knew that. He was a Lutheran pastor during the terrors of the Thirty Year's War. His town was sacked, once by the Austrians, twice by the Swedes. With poverty came pestilence. In 1637 Rinkart was burying forty or fifty parishioners a day; in all, 4,480 people, including his own wife. For many it was a descent into hell, but for Rinkart, a consent to faith. During those apocalyptic days, he wrote "Now Thank We All our God."

O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
And blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in his grace,
And guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills
In this world and the next.⁵

Amen. God is good – always.

A Time of Prosperity

Now the easy part of the text.

God is good always, even in times of prosperity.

For some, 2002 was a good year. It brought health and birth, happiness and success. As one student told me Tuesday, "I just wished the year could last forever." That good!

Norma could agree. She was a non-traditional student at Lutheran College. "Dr. Fry," she asked, "are you having lunch in the ptomaine palace?" She meant the college cafeteria. "I'll buy," she said. Normally, I don't let students pay; but, since Norma graduates in December, there is no way the tab for greasy pizza would qualify as a bribe. After some chit-chat about her commute, the weather, and a tuition hike, came the real reason for the meal deal. Norma just wanted to share her joy. Four years ago she was a problem, now she's a promise. Norma's husband took a hike, leaving her alone with two infants, one a baby five months along. She was marginalized by any measure, drifting from one minimum wage job to another. "I didn't want to be a "Welfare Queen," she

said. "I was down and out, so I had to look up." Some Basic Baptist was starting to kick in. "I said, 'Jesus, help me get my high school equivalency.'" Long pause. "Got it, so I prayed, 'Jesus, make me a nurse.'" In spite of age, obstacles, handicaps and hardships, Norma made it. This December she will get her rose, her pin, her diploma, and walk from that platform into a whole new life. "God sure is good," Norma said, and I echoed, "Umm, hmm, always."

"Life," she answered, "life is wonderful"

"What next, Norma?" I inquired.

"Missions," she affirmed, "I'm gonna give something back to God."

"When life is successful, God whispers, 'since I am good to you, take some of what you have, and share it.'"

That is the one great lesson of prosperity – charity.

I call this the greatest joy of having – giving.

Paradox? Apparent contradiction? Perhaps. But the supreme happiness of securing is sharing. Never are we more Godlike than when we give to others. Then we are the Lord's partner in the business of providence.

I learned that on a Thanksgiving Sunday twelve years ago. It is "The Tale of Two Georges."

Let's move from Amanda to Motown.

Let's go from this small white meeting house on the hill to a large red sandstone church in the inner city.

I was interim minister in a historic downtown Detroit congregation. Fifteen minutes before the service, we'd unlock. In would come the members – commuters from the Points and beyond the Outerbelt. In would come the regulars – the homeless, wanting a warm place in which to wait until the soup kitchen across the street opened. During the sermon they dozed, hoping for coffee and cookies during the Fellowship Hour. After the cake munch, that bunch went next door for their free lunch.

Most of the regulars were familiar. Same faces, same stories, same smells, every Sunday. After a few weeks of this, I was on to the "con" and my "closed heart" kept my wallet full.

This Sunday one of the regulars was an irregular.

I'd never seen him before. Different. Quiet. Actually tried to follow the service. Seemed ashamed of his situation. Slipped into the coffee hour, but kept pretty much to himself. Curiosity got the best of me. After chit-chatting my lawyer, banker and college professor, I turned to my stranger. His name? George. This George had a very different life from mine. He was black, I was white. He was from Alabama, I was from Ohio. He was poor, I was born middle class. I finished school; he didn't. I went to Ohio State, he went to the state pen. His half century on the planet was a total contrast to mine. I tried to make some sense out of his story. George just got out of prison. That's why we'd never seen him before. He'd spent the night, a very cold November night, in an unheated flophouse. That explained his body odor, for there was no running water. That George was as happy as this George to be in church – he was there for the warmth; I was there for the worship. He ate the cookies because he was starving; I because I was sociable. There is a difference.

"What next, George?" I asked.

He paused.

“I want to go home,” he finally replied.

“Where’s that?” I queried.

“Marbury, Alabama,” he answered.

I guess I looked puzzled.

“Near Birmingham, sir,” he explained.

“So you’re going there for the holidays?” I inquired.

“No, reverend, no,” he explained.

I sensed the pain. Seemed real. That was his dream, not his scheme. By then I realized all George had left in this world was his mom, a widow, way down in the Cotton Belt, who longed to see her prodigal son, just once more, before she went to be with Jesus. A mother’s love is endless. George had no bus fare. Possibly he could ride the rails. Or hitch hike. Or maybe he could find some work, to get some money, to pay his way.

I don’t know why I did it.

Was it because I was paid that Sunday? All that new money waiting to be spent?

Was it because I had listened to my own sermon?

Was it temporary insanity born of the sentimentality of the season?

“Come, George,” I said, “let’s go.”

We left the warmth of the big red sandstone church to walk through drab Detroit streets, livened a bit by some sputtering snow flakes. We came to the Greyhound Station, and then our silence stopped. George figured it out. “Can’t let you do this, Reverend,” he protested. “I’m a Baptist, not a Congregationalist.”

“Be quiet,” I insisted, “I’m neither. I’m Lutheran.”

I got him a ticket. We grabbed a meal at the Burger King. I waited till he got on board a Dixie bound bus. That black face was wet with tears. “I’ll send you the money, Doc,” he promised, “just as soon as I get it.”

“Not on your life,” I commanded, “use it to buy your momma a Christmas present.”

As the bus pulled out, a November snow began to fall in earnest. “Looks like Thanksgiving,” I thought, as I made my way back to the church.

When I got there I was given a royal razzing. “You’ve been snookered,” I was informed. Just another chapter of an Ohio country boy being taken by a big city con artist.

Even I began to wonder.

I had just about forgotten, when, a few days before Christmas, a letter came. Worst scrawl I had ever seen. Grammar: atrocious! Sentence structure? A wreck! But I wasn’t grading this paper. I was reading it – with my heart. It was from George. Postmarked Marbury, Alabama. “Here safe,” it said. “Got my mother a nice Christmas present – just like I promised.” Then, “She thanks you, so do I. God bless you, brother. Have a Merry Christmas.”

God is good – always.

And never is God nearer, than when he let’s us play God by doing good to others.

“O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endureth forever.”

Amen (Psalm 107:1AV)

¹ Oliver Goldsmith, *Treasury of Aesop’s Fables, Together with the Life of Aesop*. Illustrated by Thomas Berwick. New York: Avencel Books, 1973, p.76

² Ibid

³ "The Service," Service Book and Hymnal. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1958, p.9

⁴ Quoted by Herbert V. Prochnow and Herbert V. Prochnow, Jr., Editors, A Treasure Chest of Quotations for all Occasions, New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1983, p.348

⁵ Martin Rinkart, "Now Thank We All Our God," Tr. By Catherine Winkworth, Service Book and Hymnal No. 443. See also Albert Edward Bailey, "The Gospel in Hymns: Backgrounds and Interpretation, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950, pp.322, 323