

The Terrorist Attack in Paris this month has made today’s message one of the most difficult I have ever prepared. Often around this time of the year, we focus on being thankful. Yes, it is easy to give thanks when our health is good, we get a raise or promotion, our kids are doing well in school, and our favorite team is in the playoffs.

But, how do we give thanks when our world is falling apart? How can we be thankful in this wilderness of hate, terror, and discrimination? Terrorism scares us to death and we react with fear to refugees. Even our leaders are paralyzed by this fear. How do we give thanks when we are overwhelmed by these circumstances?

One of the popular thanksgiving hymns is “Now Thank We All Our God,” which is Hymn #102 in the United Methodist Hymnal. It was written by a German Lutheran pastor named Martin Rinkart. He served as pastor in Eilenburg throughout the savagery of the Thirty Years’ War, a time when refugees from all over the countryside fled to the security of that walled city. In the midst of war, a devastating epidemic erupted in the overcrowded town and over 8,000 people died in one year, including all the other pastors in his town and his own wife. As the only clergyman in a city of death, he conducted funeral services for as many as 40 to 50 people each day—burying about 4,500 people in a single year.

It was in the midst of this destructive pestilence and unimaginable loss that Rinkart wrote the simple prayer that has become this powerful hymn:

*Now thank we all our God / With hearts and hands and voices  
Who wondrous things has done / In whom this world rejoices  
Who from our mother’s arms / Has blessed us on our way  
With countless gifts of love / And still is ours today.*

That is how Rinkart gave thanks in his wilderness.

How do you give thanks in your wilderness—in the midst of your trials and tribulations? How do you give thanks when you can barely get out of bed in the morning because of your chronic pain or depression? How do you give thanks when you’re working at a job you hate and don’t even know if you’re making a difference? Or how do you give thanks when you don’t have a reason to get out of

bed in the morning because you're fired or retired and don't have a job to go to? Does your life still have meaning and purpose? How do you give thanks when your kids won't talk to you? Or how do you give thanks when you're absolutely worn out from taking care of your elderly parents? How do you give thanks when you're drowning in debt or facing foreclosure? How do you give thanks when you're dogged by guilt and the shame of your sinful past? How do you give thanks in your wilderness?

Honestly, I am still trying to figure it out. Giving thanks in my wilderness is not easy for me. It's easier to complain than to be content, grumble rather than to give thanks. Unlike the Apostle Paul in our scripture reading, I have yet to learn how to be content in every situation.

My most common prayer of thanksgiving is Luther's Morning Prayer: "I thank you, GOD [my heavenly Father], through Jesus Christ, your dear Son, that you have kept me this night from all harm and danger." Simply, I am giving thanks for another new day to live. Like me, if that's the best you can do in your wilderness, go for it!

In our reading from Luke's gospel, ten lepers are in the wilderness. These leprous men are not only victims of disease but also victims of social isolation. They have been ravaged by illness and, at the same time, savaged by family, friends, and neighbors. Yet Jesus steps into the midst of their marginal lives. Out of desperation they cry out for mercy and, as they do as they are told and make their way to the priests, they find that they have been healed. One of them, but only one, deeply aware of the depth of his suffering, deeply thankful for the blessing he had received, stops, turns back, and gives thanks.

We are here this morning to stop, to turn toward the living God, and to give thanks in the wilderness.

Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the first national Thanksgiving holiday in 1863, in the very midst of our nation's deadliest war. In that tragic year, like the year Martin Rinkart went through...like the year we are going through, hundreds of thousands of men died on American battlefields as brother fought brother. Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Chancellorsville...the country was intoxicated by a war rooted in racial oppression, hate, and fear.

In the midst of that tragic and terrible year of wilderness, Lincoln challenged the entire nation to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day

of Thanksgiving and Praise to God who dwells in the Heavens. Our first national Thanksgiving grew out of the violence and oppression of the Civil War. It was a day for prayerful reflection, public penance, and shared meals. No grand parades. No football games. No eager shoppers camped outside stores.

Thanksgiving Day is the day to stop, to turn toward the living God, and to give thanks even in the wilderness.

Let us watch how others are being thankful in their wilderness.

It is a mistake for us to think that thanksgiving is born of abundance only when, in fact, it is a radical response to suffering, fear, and faithlessness. True gratitude comes to us when we are most aware of our deep dependence on the mercy of God, and, by God's grace, find the courage to stop, to turn toward our God, and to give thanks for the countless gifts of love that still are ours today. Amen.