

WGUMC November 18, 2018 "Spiritual Spectrometer"
Psalm 16:5-11; I Thessalonians 5:16-18

As any soldier who has been stuck in Iraq or Afghanistan or Yemen over the Thanksgiving holiday will tell you, a war zone is no paradise. Ironically, this Thanksgiving, Paradise is looking like a war zone. Since the rest of California is connected to the poor souls in that place through the very air we breathe, it's time for all of us to take refuge in our God who first breathed into us the breath of life.

Psalm 16 is a "Song of Trust and Security in God." That's its title. And the very first verse goes, "Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge." The footnote in my Bible calls this a "refugee's song," and that seems appropriate for today. Aren't we all refugees? Not just from Paradise, but also from hope. With each passing day, we wonder, "How long can this horror last? When will the fire burn out? the smoke clear? When will they find all the missing?" These days we in California are refugees from a sense of safety. We worry about where the fires will strike next?

We need to know that God is still in control. So hear these words: “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot...” We need to be reminded of all the blessings that fire can’t burn away: “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.” Day and night, we need to have faith that we can get through this, we can hang on: “I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me; because [God] is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.” And because our heart cannot be glad about this, our soul is not able to rejoice right now, and our body does not feel secure, we need the confidence to say: “For you do not give me up to Sheol or let your faithful one see the Pit.” Finally, we need to know that God is with us so we can believe that better days are ahead of us: “You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

How does the psalmist know these things? Is life really so pleasant for him? Is the going so easy? Or is he engaging in a bit of

“preach it until you believe it”? It’s hard to tell. One thing I know is that most of us have a hard time remembering to give thanks when life is easy. That’s because when we say that life is good, we know it could be better. When we realize we have enough, we immediately think we could have a little bit more.

But I think there’s another reason that we conveniently forget to give thanks. On some level we know that there must be an act of giving in our thanksgiving. Gratitude is not just an attitude. It is a gift we give to God in response to what God has given to us.

In the Hebrew Bible, the word for “thanksgiving” is usually connected to the action of making an offering in the temple. And this Hebrew understanding of thanksgiving has been carried over into Christianity. For Christians, the Greek word for Holy Communion is “eucharist,” literally, “thanksgiving.” Catholics use that word all the time, perhaps without even knowing what it means. Methodists don’t typically use the word “eucharist.” But in our United Methodist

Book of Worship, the communion prayer is called, “The Great Thanksgiving.”

Here’s the rub: If thanksgiving requires us to do something, then our easy life won’t be so easy. Our gratitude compels us to give things we don’t want to give and do things we aren’t sure we can do, like share the Good News, make disciples, transform the world, and rebuild Paradise.

It sounds strange, but I have found that it’s easier to give thanks when the going is not so easy. I have a suspicion that the author of this psalm had seen the Pit—that’s where the dead go—plenty of times. But he discovered what a lot of us discover when life is the pits, when we’d rather be dead: that is one of best times to see the Lord of Life.

Bob Cicou used to be the pastor of Evergreen Valley UMC. He was in our circuit. Now he’s the pastor of Paradise UMC. Today, his congregation is gathering at Trinity UMC in Chico. The bishop will be there. She will pray “The Great Thanksgiving” and break the bread

with them. Apparently, the Paradise church building is still standing, though no one knows what condition it's in. But Pastor Bob has lost his home, as have many if not most of his parishioners.

Nevertheless, he sends this message: "We are battered, shattered, and scattered. But we are still the Church."

The faithful Methodists who used to live in Paradise could teach us something about giving thanks this Thanksgiving. These are the hearts that I hold when I read the words Paul writes to the people of Thessalonica. He tells them to rejoice, to pray, and to give thanks. And he tells them to do these things always, without ceasing, and in all circumstances. "This," he says, "is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." In three of the shortest verses in the Bible, Paul captures what a Christian life looks like. It isn't complicated, but it isn't easy.

Oddly, a devastating fire can make it easier. I know this because I've been there. I know how a fire can strip away all trivial distractions and help us focus on what's really important. I know how the flames can burn away all the material attachments we have

and the things we hoard. So I have hope that God can somehow use all the death we have seen in this past week to show us a new path of life.

Thank God not all of us will have to go through a fire but all of us need to find the path of life. Without flames to illuminate it, how do we find it? How do we learn to rejoice always, pray without ceasing and give thanks in all circumstances?

Paul says in Romans, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” [Rom 8:28] And we say, “Really? All things? Even the horrible things?” Paul makes it sound as if we have to have some kind of superhero power to be able to see the good in all things. At the very least, we need a special kind of seeing. And as I got to thinking about it, I started wishing that I had some kind of spiritual spectrometer.

Do you remember spectrometers from physics class? They are used to separate and measure the different parts of a beam of light

or to determine the chemical make-up of stars and planets. The earliest ones were simple prisms that separated ordinary white light into its rainbow-colored components. Wouldn't it be great if we had a similar tool that could analyze our very complex lives and separate out all the problems and break them down into smaller, more distinguishable and more manageable pieces? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had the capability of going into the disaster zone of our life and use our spiritual spectrometers to determine exactly where God is and how grace is at work?

We do have such a tool. We do have the capability. It's called faith. Faith can function like a prism through which we see life in all its complexity, its tragedy and its beauty. As you know, smoke-filled skies make for some amazingly beautiful sunsets.

But faith is also like a more sophisticated spectrometer in that it must be carefully calibrated, in this case, by the standard of Scripture, by the Word of God. You have to know the stories. Not only that, but faith must be properly used by trained technicians; in

other words, we have to be practitioners of prayer. This is how people of faith see and hear God. But then the results of faith—that is, what we believe and how we act—must be peer-reviewed by the community of the faithful. This may not be the scientific method, but it is a trusted spiritual method for people of faith to use so they can see where God is at work and know what to do.

My life depended on this method in October of 2000. Two weeks after the fire at Grace UMC in Santa Cruz, we held a Community Service of Memorial and Thanksgiving for the burned-out sanctuary. Our spiritual spectrometers had been hard at work looking for evidences of God and traces of grace, and I gave a draft report on the results. To a church that had in the previous year also seen a crippling financial crisis and a big flood in the basement, I read some Scripture and then said:

“The prophet Isaiah tells us that when we pass through the waters, God will be with us. When we walk through fire, the flame will not consume us. In this past year, the people of Grace have learned that they can trust that promise. This church has known Grace under water and Grace under fire. And we know that God is with us even now because God’s grace is not only under us but all

around us. In the last two weeks we have lived this. Grace has come to us, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. Grace has been graced by support coming from all directions, from old friends and family, from neighbors and total strangers. The fire brought this whole community to new life, to a new awareness of our relatedness. The walls are torn down, yes, but some barriers between you and us are burning up, too. Now we see what could not be seen, the invisible lines of connection, the hidden bonds of our humanness, the concealed strength of our common life. The past two weeks have reminded us that God is in-fleshed in the wider community and God's love comes to us very tangibly. Whether it was in fighting the fire, protecting the public, answering questions, maintaining calm, salvaging memories, consoling members, calling a friend, sharing a story, posting a prayer, writing a song, working up a sweat, forming a committee, providing good counsel, donating time, offering space, giving money: all is grace."

The fire at Grace was not fun. The boundary lines did not fall for us in pleasant places. The fire had made not a goodly but a God-awful mess of our heritage. But faith made us glad, nonetheless. By faith, we had spent the last two weeks both crying and rejoicing always, not sleeping but praying without ceasing, and getting hugs and giving thanks in this most awful of circumstances. So we brought flowers and laid them on the steps of the sanctuary as if to say that we had seen the Pit but thank God we were going to survive. We had no idea what tomorrow would bring, but we were

certain that God would not only show us the path of life. We knew that it would be filled with beauty.

Fire or no fire, smoke or no smoke, we give thanks for the beauty that is all around us and the beauty of faith that God puts inside of us. So I'll close with the last two verses of a song that sings of that beauty. One of my parishioners was so inspired by the fire that he wrote and sang us this song. I send his words along with our prayers to our sisters and brothers in Paradise, whether they live in the town that needs rebuilt or the land that will never burn.

We know there is no reason now
To whimper or complain
There is no time for worry
Pointing fingers, casting blame.
We've received a Godly gift
Though mystifying and strange
And our love is much stronger now tempered by the flame.

Our tears are now like diamonds
Sparkling bright and bold
And time is that old wool sweater
We break out when nights are cold
Our laughter is the music
That accompanies the pain
And our love is much stronger now tempered by the flame.
[Steve Bare, 2000]