

Over and over, we read in Scripture, ‘Rejoice, and be glad...’and every time we read these words, though the circumstances are different, the reasons for rejoicing are always essentially the same. God is God; God cares; God will restore, God will redeem...and over and over, God’s people find that reminder is essential.

Because it’s easy to forget. It’s easy to be overwhelmed by the state of things – to become discouraged by the behaviour of our fellow humans – to forget that, no matter how hard we try, we can’t fix everything, and we can’t control anything. So over and over again, the collected memories that Scripture represents invite us to remember the moments when all seemed lost and turn (yet again) toward God.

Joel’s memories (and experiences) serve to draw his original audience out of self pity (and self-induced misery) toward the timeless idea that God can fix the mess they have made of their freedom in the world. Joel writes of God’s readiness to ‘repay for the years the swarming locust has eaten...’ – good will follow bad, in other words, if people are willing/able to remember/acknowledge that such goodness is part of the gift of Creation (and not a result of our hard work or excellent behaviour.) The essential goodness – the bountiful grace is always there, but our ‘efforts’ to succeed, to wield power, to maintain control will obscure the goodness that is ‘build in’ to Creation by a generous and compassionate Creator.

Rejoice and be glad, says Joel – remember and give thanks; be grateful, and see if that way of thinking doesn’t reveal something better.

And we mark a day – a long weekend, if you’re lucky – for ‘thanks-giving.’

(You can’t hear the hyphen, but I urge you to intentionally separate thanks-giving into its component parts. This is bigger than the ‘keep Christ in Christmas’ movement – trust me)

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I’m not sure why thanks-giving wouldn’t be harder this year. For the second year we are invited to scrape up some collective gratitude while wondering where the ‘normal’ went. Another ‘family gathering’ holiday full of warnings about gathering. Another seasonal transition marked by masks and tense conversations about health care and shared responsibility. Too often our past celebrations have included empty words about our ‘many blessings’ – but recently we’re learning

that it's important to dig deeper and think more carefully about what constitutes a blessing; about what might be worthy of our gratitude. As the weekend unfolds and another 'holiday' is added to the list of things we think we've missed, I'd suggest that we need Jesus' words.

"Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life..."

In Matthew's gospel, this is one of the pivotal moments in the Sermon on the mount (extended version.) Blessed are they, etc. etc. you have heard it said, etc. etc. – all serve as the set up for this – Do NOT Worry about your life.

To a people who have spent generations trying to establish rules for living and pleasing God, to a people who have examined the law and the prophets and turned those memories into iron-clad certainties, and to us, the inheritors of that religious legacy, Jesus says don't worry – stay in the present – be grateful that there is enough good 'built in' to Creation by the Creator. Experience that. Rejoice in that. Let gratitude for all God is and all God is doing liberate you.

It's not that hard to imagine that gratitude and worry are opposites. One will drive out the other. A fixation on what's missing – on what's been lost – on what we cannot do – these make gratitude (thanks-giving) nearly impossible. And in the same way – as Jesus describes it – the daily habit of recognizing beauty and abundance makes worry fade into the future. But future challenges are just that – for the future. Jesus doesn't say don't be prepared; he says (more than once) don't worry, and that makes all the difference.

The gift of faith is the fuel for gratitude. The prophets tell stories of God coming to the rescue to encourage folks to believe it can happen again. That's faith. And Jesus paints a similar picture.

But rather than mighty battles which defeat persistent enemies, Jesus points to abundance – to beauty – to the basic necessities for which we can be truly thankful.

Safety and security – national pride – economic stability; these things depend on human activity, and are too easily upended. The things we are casually thankful for are equally casual. The gratitude that liberates us is motivated by things that are beyond our control. Do not worry, says Jesus.

Now, we are are perilously close to causing irreparable harm to the created order. The earth and all that is in it has been ravaged by human greed, and the effects of that greed are in evidence everywhere we look; poor harvests – fires – drought – in our arrogance, we have managed the unthinkable; we've altered the cycles of nature to some degree. We've failed in our sacred trust to be stewards of Creation.

Do not worry, says Jesus.

Our faith is still the fuel for that liberating gratitude – a faith that proclaims 'Christ has died; Christ IS Risen; Christ will come again' is faith enough to help us find a way back to balance. Focus on today, says Jesus – on what you can do; on what make you glad, and brings you joy. These are gifts of God, and they are enough. Tomorrow will bring its own worries – and the formula will work again.

Look around. Rejoice and be glad. Do not worry. Creation is abundant and can be resilient, if only we would remember our role – if only we would truly give thanks.