**Genesis 8:18-22** November 23, 2022

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Thanksgiving Eve

*Genesis 8:18 So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives. 19All the animals and all the creatures that move along the ground and all the birds—everything that moves on the earth—came out of the ark, one kind after another.*

*20Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. 21The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. 22As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**What Does a Burnt Offering Smell Like to God?**

I’ve thought it. You’ve thought it. “You know, pastor, the evening before Thanksgiving isn’t the best time to have a special church service. First, what I normally have to get done in seven days this week has to get done in three days. Plus, I have to prepare extra meals. Then there will be extra people over, maybe even overnight. And we had that basket auction on Sunday—I had a good time, don’t get me wrong—but we had the basket auction and I didn’t get all my Sunday stuff done. I’m behind and I have extra stuff. Now you say we need people to decorate the church on Saturday morning. Pastor, this really is not the best time to have an extra church service.” I know. I understand. It’s not that you begrudge God your gratitude. It’s just that you have things to get done and there are only seven days in a week, and each of those days has only twenty-four hours.

Pause to consider Noah. No, I don’t want you to feel guilty. Just consider. Noah’s whole family stepped out of the ark. How good solid ground felt under their feet, the sun warming their backs, fresh air that didn’t smell like manure. Then out came the animals. I have an aunt who talks about how her dairy cows, after being locked up in the barn for the winter months, kick up their heels when they’re first let out to the spring pasture. Just imagine an entire zoo of animals charging to freedom!

But for Noah, his wife, his sons and their families, it wasn’t freedom. You think *you* are busy? Imagine the worst natural disaster you have ever seen—flood, tornado, hurricane, whatever—and there is no government response, not even a charitable organization with a food box. You have to do everything with your own hands. There is no Home Depot, no Kroger’s, not even a Dollar Store. Noah & Family had enough work to keep them more than busy for the rest of their lives.

They came out of the ark, ***“Then Noah built an altar to the Lord.”*** A list of things to do ten miles long—I’ll bet Noah’s wife hadn’t slept for a week for all the stuff running through her mind—and Noah’s aged eyes measured the situation and he said, “Before we do anything else, boys, we need to gather a couple dozen rocks as big as you can carry, and we need to make an altar and sacrifice to the Lord.” Time for a worship service. I wonder if his boys grumbled. I wonder if his wife rolled her eyes. —Or maybe they said, “You’re right, dad, we need to remember God before we get started.” I like to think that’s what they said.

Altar built, Noah, ***“taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds”*** [clean means fit for sacrifice] ***“he sacrificed burnt offerings on the altar.”*** It is worth mentioning that there weren’t a lot of animals. Still, Noah sacrificed about the most valuable thing there was at that moment.

But here is something more to explore on Noah’s side: what was Noah saying when he offered this burnt offering. I, personally, have always thought of this offering as a thank you to God for getting them through that flood. Which is part of the picture. But burnt offerings were not thanksgiving offerings. Enter into the mind of the ancient Israelite and you find that there were actually several very specific different sacrifices. There was an offering specifically for thanksgiving (Leviticus 7:12-15), and this was not a thanksgiving offering. This was a burnt offering. So what was Noah saying when he offered a *burnt* offering?

Well, let’s look at a couple other “burnt offerings” in the Bible.

In the time of the prophet Samuel, the Israelites were warring against the Philistines. One time, as they were about to go into battle, they said to Samuel, *“Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines. Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on Israel’s behalf, and the Lord answered him”* (1 Samuel 7:8-9). That burnt offering was both a plea for help and a pledge of service to the Lord.

In the days of King Solomon, the first temple of the Lord was dedicated in Jerusalem. When Solomon consecrated the courtyard of the temple, he offered burnt offerings (1 Kings 8:64). Yes, there was an element of thankfulness for that temple. But that burnt offering was even more about dedicating the future of that place to God.

What’s the point? While a burnt offering took into account God’s past goodness, even more it looked to the future and trusted and dedicated that future to God.

Noah stood on the flank of Mt. Ararat, getting ready to embark on a new and reconfigured life. He and his family were beginning that life remembering God’s past goodness, but even more they were dedicating their uncertain future to God. They would need his help. Oh, would they need his help! And they wanted their lives to be to God’s glory.

How appropriate as we remember God’s goodness to us in the past year! Yes, we give thanks. All that we have is from God’s hand. The material blessings, life itself, are God’s gift. We are people who also know God’s forgiving goodness in Jesus Christ, so we give thanks for that.

But like Noah, like Zacchaeus in that Gospel reading, Thanksgiving also renews our desire to serve God. God has been so good to us. Even in the challenging years, the sorrowful seasons, we know that God has been good to us. So we want to renew our dedication to him.

How did God take Noah’s sacrifice? ***“The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: ‘Never again will I curse the ground… and never again will I destroy all living creatures… As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.’”*** God was pleased that Noah had remembered his goodness. God promised good for Noah.

And yet, even as the Lord made his pledge there is that sentence that makes you wonder, ***“even though every inclination of man’s heart is evil from childhood.”***  Was the Lord pleased with Noah or not?

In the moment of Noah’s sacrifice, the Lord saw straight through the smoke of the sacrifice into the heart of Noah. God saw worship and devotion and thanks, imperfect though they were and God was pleased. Then, knowing the believing heart, God zooms back out and every aspect of what God sees is beautiful—the pleasing aroma, the offered animals, the unhewn rocks of the altar, the family of eight standing or maybe even kneeling in worship, the open door of the ark, people about to disembark into a wide open world. God sees and is moved by their childlike trust, even though they are frail humanity. As Psalm 103 says, *“As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust… the Lord’s love is with those who fear him”* (13-14,17)

And then the Lord promised always to be the reliable partner: ***“Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.’”*** He will provide what people need. There will be no repeat of the flood until the last day.

Here we come to grips with the love of our God, what the Lord smelled in the burnt offering of Noah. God’s is a *gracious* love, a love that doesn’t *have* to love us, but which does, and which rejoices in our worship of him. In the New Testament we see God’s gracious love most clearly in Jesus Christ. Yet we see it clearly through all the Bible.

Count God’s blessings tonight and tomorrow. Maybe even take a pen and write a list. Then offer a prayer, maybe even an out-loud prayer before your Thanksgiving meal, that is somehow like the burnt offering of Noah on that mountainside: a prayer thanking God for all his blessings and a prayer which dedicates the future to our saving gracious God. That prayer is a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Amen.