**James 1:16-18** November 24, 2021

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

 *James 1:16 Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers. 17Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

 Middle of the week; full day; getting ready for tomorrow. At this point a padded pew is nothing short of an invitation to grab a nap. Be strong!

 Dear Christians, it is right of you to be here tonight. I don’t say it is awesome for you to be here or that you should get some sort of recognition. I say this: It is right to be here. It is right to be in God’s house the night before Thanksgiving, before we revel in the biggest earthly blessings there are: family and good food. All the rest is gravy. It is right to be here so that tomorrow while we are laughing and enjoying the company of the people we love most, while we enjoy our favorite foods, that if not out loud, at least in our hearts we say, “Thank you, Lord!”

 Now, since it is the middle of the week, a busy week, I’m going to take it easy on you. Let’s start with something fun, at least for me it is. Most weekends I enjoy watching at least one NFL game. If you are someone who has abandoned the NFL, I respect that. I hope you can at least consider this next thought.

 If you are a Green Bay Packers fan, you know the woes of their kicker Mason Crosby. About four or five weeks ago he went into a game with the longest active streak of unmissed field goals in the entire league. In that game, he missed three field goals and very nearly lost an easily winable game for his team. Since that game, he has been very unpredictable, making some tough ones, missing some gimmes. You just don’t know anymore.

 Kind of like me and bowling. If I were on your bowling team, I would not be the source of anyone’s confidence. Sometimes I’ll be up around 150, which isn’t much, but it’s something. The very next game I will barely crack 100. You would know one thing: that you couldn’t count on me to deliver.

 Kind of like God, right? You never know what you’re going to get. Some days make you want to sing, others cry. Sometimes good, sometimes bad with God. You never know, right? Wrong! Wrong, wrong, wrong.

 ***“Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers,”*** says James. This word encourages us to remember what we really do know about God in our heads, even if we don’t always feel it in our hearts. ***“Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above.”***

 *Everything* good in our lives is from God. I hope that tomorrow you will think a list of God’s blessings in your life. Some of those are part of life year after year: the faith you have in your saving God, freedom to worship according to your conscience, a loving and faithful spouse, parents who gave of themselves, a job that has put food on the table and children through school. I hope you will also make a list of blessings specific to this year: a move for the better, a new (or at least new-to-you) car, a child or grandchild added to the family.

 But what about the other things not on your thank you list? Personal loss of health. A devastating breakup of a family. The news always reporting hatred and death. Is God like that weak link on the bowling team? Sometimes delivering, sometimes completely failing?

 ***“Every good and perfect gift is… coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”*** Two things: All good things are from God. But there is more.

 This also means that things that are not good are not from God. And some of the things we think are good, are not, because they are not from God. Think of Zacchaeus from our Gospel reading. He was wealthy from no small amount of dishonest dealing. Suddenly, with the arrival of Jesus in his life, he changed. He no longer considered what he once considered a blessing—getting rich off of others—to be a blessing.

 God’s goodness assures us of God’s goodness even in moments that don’t look good. Think of Noah and the forty days of watery judgment and a year in the stinky ark. Yet when he/they broke out of the ark, the first thing he did was give thanks to God. He knew that God works good from *all* things for his beloved.

 This is a dependable truth. God and goodness go together, and they don’t exist apart from each other.

 In the second half of verse 17 we have something strange. There are a bunch of Greek astronomical terms—yah, as in, stars—which is kind of weird. Now it doesn’t come across much in English, but the four terms are: ***heavenly lights, change, shifting,*** and***shadows.*** God’s word, in talking about God’s goodness, would draw our minds to the nighttime sky.

 Our heavenly Father has created the heveanly lights. This means the sun, moon, planets and stars. Humans have been to the moon. We talk about going to Mars. But it is highly improbable that we will ever get out of this solar system. We are tiny. God is almighty! He is strong, strong enough to create and manage things that we will never even be able to touch, much less control. God is able to do good that we can’t dream of!

 And our good God doesn’t change. Here these astronomical terms would have brought to mind things like the twinkling stars; the moon in its phases, sometimes brighter, sometimes dimmer, sometimes eclipsed. God *isn’t* like that! God isn’t like when you were a kid and you carefully watched mom to see if now was the right time to ask her to take you to the mall. God is constant, unchangingly good. We should not consider one year more blessed than another. Sure, that’s how we count it. But this verse assures us that every Thanksgiving the only thing we ought to do is thank God. A few years ago there was a popular call and response in Christian circles, “God is good… all the time.” That’s what this is saying.

 This truth impacts how we live. ***“[The Father] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”***

 You do know what first-fruits are, right? It’s a farming/garden thing. You plant the tomatoes. Then you wait. You water them, then you wait. You weed them; you tie them up and fertilize them. Wait, wait, wait. Finally you see the first tomato, but it’s green. Eventually it turns yellow, then orange. Your mouth is watering. Finally, it is ripe. You pick it, bring it inside, wash it, slice it, take your first bite and let it melt in your mouth while you say a little thank-you prayer. In the Old Testament laws, that very first produce of the year wasn’t for you. It was to be presented to the Lord in the temple. It was his. That’s you. In Christ, God made you his that you might be ***“a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”***

 Do you know something else about firstfruits? (Here I am speaking what I remember of gardening a while back.) Firstfruits are the best. In tomatoes, they are the reddest, the biggest, the tastiest. They are less diseased and better formed. That’s you. Like first-fruits, God’s people ought to stand out from the rest of the world. We have reason to! We understand God’s goodness in years that we call “good” *and* in the years that some call “bad.” When it comes to people, we return good for evil. We forgive. We are merciful and gracious, accepting and friendly. We mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. No, we are not perfect. But bought by the blood of Christ, and filled with the Holy Spirit, we shine God’s glory into this world. We are God’s eye-gladdening firstfruits.

 Tomorrow, what a day to be that! What a day to be the best example we can be of people who know God’s goodness, understand his purpose, and live like his special creation.

 God is good all the time. Let us give thanks all the time. Amen!