

Grace, mercy and peace be to you, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

[Counting our blessings]

It's Thanksgiving. That means it's finally socially acceptable to watch Christmas movies again!

A family favorite for us is *White Christmas*.

It's part of our regular Christmas routine.

And there's a song from it that my household sings even when it's not Christmas time.

(Well, there are several songs we sing from it even when it's not Christmas time.)

But one in particular that Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney sing:

When I'm worried,

And I can't sleep,

I count my blessings instead of sheep,

And I fall asleep,

Counting my blessings.

“I fall asleep counting my blessings.”

It's a phrase that's appeared on so many Hallmark cards that it's almost grown trite.

It's a trope in movies, an empty platitude—something said, but not really believed.

We ought to give that phrase some more attention.

That was the thinking in establishing ‘Thanksgiving’ as a national holiday.

It is good to *count our blessings*—and to give thanks to God for them!

[Counting blessings: in good times]

There's a saying that goes:

“It's easy to give thanks in good times;

it's hard to give thanks in bad times.”

I'm not sure that's true—either part of it.

Today's Gospel lesson certainly doesn't make it easy to believe.

Jesus was traveling in the *desert*, “On the road, passing along between Samaria and Galilee...”

Do you know what that terrain is like? *Desert*. Dry, rocky, craggy ground for miles.

It was such a miserable place, that the only people living in that *desert* were lepers.

Lepers... people afflicted by a bacterial infection

that causes parts of the body to literally decay and eventually fall off.

It's still around today. Hasn't been eradicated.

(I understand the University Hospital in town is a leading research centers for it.)

People are left deformed—and contagious.

In those days, these lepers were *deserted* by society.

Deserted in the ***desert***.

And it was to ten of these lepers,
in the ***desert***, “on the road, passing along between Samaria and Galilee”
that Jesus came.

We remember what happened: Jesus healed them.

He told them to “show themselves to the priests”—to be declared officially clean!
To rejoin society! To leave the ***desert*** and go home!

These lepers had left the “bad times,” and were deep into the “good times!”

If it was easy to give thanks in “good times,”
all of them would’ve come back to thank Jesus.

Yet only one returns.

It wasn’t the first time people in a ***desert*** failed to show thankfulness.

In today’s Old Testament reading, we heard how God’s people had to be reminded by Moses.

Reminded to thank God for all he had done:

providing clothing in the ***desert***,

providing manna—heavenly bread—in the ***desert***.

providing a route out of slavery, out of the ***desert*** in the first place!

It’s hard to give thanks—even in “good times!”

[Counting blessings: in bad times]

What about the “bad times?”

What about the times when *we’re* the ones afflicted by the ‘leprosy’ of sin.

Leprosy... There’s really no better physical manifestation of what sin does in our lives,
causing decay between believers—between each part of the Body of Christ,
cleaving us from that Body,
stranding us in miserable ***deserts*** of isolation.

Each of us has lived through an event, or a time we felt alone, isolated, or *quarantined* maybe.

For many of us, this COVID time has been a “bad time.”

Our lives have been turned upside down.

We all know someone who has been ill.

Almost all of us know someone who has died—

Alone in a hospital room, usually, because of the nature of this virus.

In a sort of ***desert***’.

Many will not be able to visit loved ones for the holidays this year.

Either because the threat to others is too great, or because loved ones aren’t home to visit.

We’ll ‘Zoom’ Thanksgiving

And maybe even Christmas and New Years’.

For many, it will be a lonely ***desert***.

This suffering, this loneliness...
It hasn't changed since the days of the lepers in the actual *desert*.
It is the result of one thing: Sin.
Sin infects this world—we've all been in the *desert*.

[Counting blessings: at the Cross]

We cannot know why God, in his wisdom permits that suffering,
why he allows *deserts* to surround us.
But we do know—we *know*—that God is not the cause of our suffering.

And we know—we *know*—that Sin has been defeated.
We have a God who met us in the *desert*.
Who became one of us.
Who took our sin and nailed it to His Cross.

There, on the Cross, Jesus endured all the suffering, all the pain of the world.
There, on the Cross, Jesus was cut off from everything,
isolated in the *desert*,
enduring the full 'leprosy' of Sin.
And it was there, on the Cross, that Jesus cured you of that 'leprosy' of sin.

It is there, on the Cross, where we need to count our blessings...
Because that's the blessing that is always present, even in life's *deserts*.
The blessing of the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.

[Counting blessings: like Paul]

St. Paul says in today's reading from Philippians that he
"has learned the secret to being content in plenty and in want..."
And he says it with a wink and a nudge.
Because that "secret" is no secret at all.
It is proclaimed to all nations and people—and to *you*:
Jesus Christ is risen.
Alleluia! He is risen! *He is risen indeed, alleluia!*

And if Christ is risen, then we too will rise.
We are free to live lives of thanksgiving.

What does it look like to live a life of thanksgiving?

It looks like coming back to the God who was with you in the desert, like that one leper.
It looks like thanking God for providing 'manna' in the desert, like the Israelites.

It looks like Paul saying:

"do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication
with *thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God."

It means:

*When I'm worried,
And I can't sleep,
I count my blessings instead of sheep,
And I fall asleep,
Counting my blessings.*

St. Paul tells us where to look.
(and Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney tell us how to do it!)

[Counting blessings: in Thanksgiving!]

There's another song that we can keep in mind, too.
As an example of a 'Life of Thanksgiving' in action.

Our closing hymn today will be a familiar one to Lutherans: "Now Thank we All Our God."
The Lutheran Pastor Martin Rinckart composed it in the early 1600s.

To be specific, during the Thirty Years' War.
It was the first "World War" that saw fighting on four continents.
To understate, it was a bloody war:

About half a million died in combat alone (twice the US casualties in WWII).
Another ~12 million died in the resulting plagues and famines
brought by plundering armies.

Pastor Rinckart officiated at over 4,000 funerals in that time, sometimes 50 per day.
And throughout those terrors, Pastor Rinckart gave thanks to God.
He knew—he *knew*—that even when the world seems a desert, God's blessings remain.
Those blessings may seem as insignificant as a dinner meal,
or as important as surviving a plague.
All are reasons to lift up our thanks to God, "with heart, and hands, and voices."

It's the perfect Thanksgiving hymn.

It was even written as a meal prayer!

And now, we prepare to receive the greatest meal ever given us:
The Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.
Sustenance in the *desert*, far greater than manna.

Let us live lives of Thanksgiving!
And if we should die, let us "fall asleep counting our blessings."

In great Thanksgiving, let us:

**Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among the people. Amen! (Psalm 96:3)**
