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Give thanks for Christmas

By Josh Dear

(Assistant Pastor, Lakeside Baptist Church)

Every November, Christians are reminded of our need to be giving continual thanks to God for all of the blessings that he showers upon us every day of our lives. Admittedly, we all fall short in expressing gratitude to our loving heavenly Father, as he deserves. God — who (among other things) created us, loves us, forgives us, comforts us, guides us, convicts us, heals us, and blesses us — is worthy of *all* our praise and thanksgiving, not only for the “good things” that he does for us, but also for simply being who he is. Where would we be if we didn’t have a loving, merciful, all-knowing God ruling over the world and our lives? I, for one, can’t even imagine!

Consider briefly some of what God’s Word says to us about our need to be thankful. Psalm 118:1 proclaims, “Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.” Psalm 145:10 addresses God directly, declaring, “All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your saints shall bless you.” Do we bless him, as this passage says? If not, do we really fit the description of a “saint,” according to Scripture? In the familiar text of 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Paul exhorts believers to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, *give thanks in all circumstances*, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (emphasis added). Finally, Colossians 2:7 reminds Christians that we are to be, “...abounding in thanksgiving.” Do we really *abound* in thanksgiving to God? Sometimes it seems that we are so busy being pleased with our own efforts and abilities that we forget to give God any thanks at all, much less to actually *abound* in thanksgiving for all that he is, does, and has done for our sake.

As we persist in giving God less praise and thanksgiving than are truly due him, we should allow Luke 17:11-19 to serve as a serious warning to us. When God does something magnificent in our lives — he *expects* to receive thanks from us. Anything less is unsatisfactory to God. Just as parents like to be thanked from time to time for the multitude of ways that they provide for the needs of their children, so does our Creator appreciate and expect some gratitude from us — and, as terrific as parents can be, God is far more deserving of our thanks! When we fail to thank God, he notices. However, when we are faithful to thank God properly (as one of the lepers in this text illustrates), our lives are more richly blessed.

While a true spirit of thanksgiving should last year-round, our annual celebrations each December remind us of the single greatest reason that we have to be thankful — the gift of Jesus! We are all born “innocent” by worldly standards, but *enslaved to sin* by God’s standards. We inherit the sin nature, which separates all of humanity from right standing with God, and this can only be remedied by genuine repentance for our sins, and by trusting in the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Scripture teaches us that, “...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), and that ...the wages of sin is death, but the free *gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23, emphasis added).

Did you catch that? Salvation is a *gift* to those who trust in Christ — and the greatest one we will ever have the opportunity to receive! Do you think that God wants us to receive this gift with proper gratitude and abounding thankfulness? How foolish it will be if we don’t! As Hebrews 2:3 inquires, “...how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” We dare not refuse this marvelous gift of love, mercy, and forgiveness, which is offered to us through the birth and sacrificial death of our Savior, Jesus Christ. And, for those of us who do receive this gift into our lives, we dare not fail to *thank* the loving heavenly Father who sent his only begotten Son into the world for our sake, nor the glorious Savior who died in our place. So, as we celebrate Christmas once again, may we all be reminded afresh to keep our focus on Christ above all else, and to offer an ample supply of thanks to the God who loves us so much. •

Polar Bear VFW post seeking members

By Max Riekse

Fruitport Polar Bear VFW Post 3734 (Veterans of Foreign Wars), 5201 Airline Road in Fruitport is accepting new members for post membership. This includes all those present or past members of the United States military who were awarded an overseas service medal or ribbon such as the Expeditionary Medal, Purple Heart, Bronze Star, CIB, combat action ribbon, and service medals for WWII, the Korean War, Vietnam War, Persian Gulf War, Iraq War, and Afghanistan War. Both male and female qualified veterans are welcome. We need some female members to help keep the men straight.

If interested, send a copy of your DD 214 with the above medals and ribbons noted on it to: Max Riekse, Post Commander 3734, P.O. Box 82, Fruitport, MI 49415. •

Bringing Christ to Christmas

By Pastor Casey Arnouts

(Pastor of Calvary Temple)

Advent is upon us, so I am prepared to admit that Christmas is almost here.

I confess I was a bit annoyed when the Christmas music started before Thanksgiving and the Christmas displays started appearing before Halloween. It can feel as though an elf is jabbing me in the back with a candy cane, forcing me through fall into the national time of spending. (I was just getting used to not seeing the election commercials as the holiday shopping commercials flooded in.)

Since my childhood I have heard people decry the commercialism of the season. For many a prime example of this is the near ubiquitous “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” I assume the initial motive behind this was to eliminate potential offense for people of other faiths or no faith at all — an important principle for retailers. But for many Christians this simple, yet meaningful, omission seems to point to the commercialism that threatens to overwhelm the holiday commemorating Jesus Christ’s birth.

For what it is worth, I have found comfort in the realization that ours is not the first generation to wrestle with popular festivals devoid of any connection to Jesus; our Christian forbearers in the late Roman Empire were surrounded by them at this time of year.

Saturnalia was a festival introduced 200 years before Christ. It was marked by foolish play, giving of gifts and social reversals; slaves would be the masters and their owners would serve as waiters. It was so popular that it grew from a feast on December 17 to a weeklong festival ending on the 23/24th. This week was so well-loved that attempts by Caesar Augustus to reduce it to five days met with riots.

Sol Invictus was the feast of the Unconquered Sun. It was in honor of a Roman sun god and celebrated on December 25th, right around the time of the Winter Solstice as the days begin to grow longer, ‘conquering’ the darkness of night.

It is very possible that you have never heard of these old festivals — and there is a good reason. At a certain point the Church decided that, of all people, those who knew Christ had a real reason to celebrate. So rather than eliminating these festivities (and since the Bible doesn’t tell us the date of Jesus’ birth) the Church provided a real reason for joy.

I can imagine them talking to their Roman neighbors, “You want to hear about a social reversal, let me tell you about the God who came as a baby to give himself on behalf of his creation.” Or, “If you think the sun coming back is exciting, let me tell you about the Unconquered Son, the one who rose from the dead and gives eternal life.”

Thinking about all of that as I walked past a row of Santa Clauses sitting next to the Halloween costumes helped provide me with both comfort and a challenge.

Comfort in the sense that people in all times and places are looking for a reason to celebrate and have joy. The giving and receiving of gifts, beautiful music, festive decorations, cards, parties, and my wife’s obsession with baking — all of these things are great and give a person cause to celebrate. They should be enjoyed.

But as a Christian I know that Jesus provides a real reason to celebrate. Gifts break, credit card bills come due, baked goods get eaten and go to my waist. All the things people can do to celebrate have a downside or an end, but Jesus came to give us peace with God, to make peace between people a possibility and to provide a new and eternal life. That is a real reason to rejoice.

The challenge comes in showing and sharing that message with everyone around us. Our Christian forbearers were very successful. (Remember, we don’t celebrate *Saturnalia* or *Sol Invictus* any more.) We, too, can rise to the challenge. Christmas may be filled with dancing Santas and overcrowded stores, but Christians bring Christ to Christmas — when he fills our hearts, changes our lives and gives us enduring joy — then that message can rise above commercialism, find people’s hearts and bring the peace and joy everyone seeks in this season. •

Braised wild goose or turkey

by Judy Brandow

- 1 wild goose or turkey, 8 pounds
- 2-3 sprigs parsley
- 1 stalk celery
- 1 bay leaf
- pinch of thyme
- 1 qt. stock or consommé

Clean and prepare game for cooking. Stuff, if desired. Truss legs and wings close to body and cover bird with slice of fat salt pork. Roast in hot oven (400°) until well browned. Remove all fat from pan, then add vegetables, bay leaf, thyme, and stock. Cover pan, continue cooking, basting often for 2 to 3 hours or until tender. Strain gravy and thicken with 1 tablespoon cornstarch mixed in 2 tablespoons water. •