

Magic Words

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Opening Words (#423 – Psalm 92 slightly revised)

It is a joy to give thanks to the Eternal,
to sing thy praise, O thou Most High,
to proclaim thy goodness in the morning
to sweet music!
I sing for joy at all that thou hast done.

Reading

Welcome Morning

Anne Sexton

There is joy
in all:
in the hair I brush each morning,
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
that I rub my body with each morning,
in the chapel of eggs I cook

each morning,

in the outcry from the kettle

that heats my coffee

each morning,

in the spoon and the chair

that cry "hello there, Anne"

each morning,

in the godhead of the table

that I set my silver, plate, cup upon

each morning.

All this is God,

right here in my pea-green house

each morning

and I mean,

though often forget,

to give thanks,

to faint down by the kitchen table

in a prayer of rejoicing

as the holy birds at the kitchen window

peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,
let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God, this laughter of the morning,
lest it go unspoken.
The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
dies young.

So what *are* the magic words? Abra-cadabra? No! *Please* and *thank you*, that's right. May I have some, *please*? Ok, here you go...now, what do you say? *Thank you*.

This is how some of us were taught to pray also. There were basically two types of prayers: the petitionary prayer: (*please*) and the prayer of gratitude: (*thank you*). "*Please*, God, deliver me from this mess." "*Thank you*, Lord, for all the blessings you have given me."

It was pointed out often from the pulpit of the Lutheran church I grew up in that most of us prayed when we needed something, when we were in trouble, when we were sick and sad, feeling helpless and hopeless, but we often forgot to pray when things were going well. We had mastered *please*, but were not so skilled at *thank you*.

Like Anne Sexton, we have good intentions:

and [we] mean,

though often forget,

to give thanks...

but it's so hard to remember! And not surprisingly, I suppose. It struck me as a young child, in everyday contact with adults, that *please* was the truly *magic* word because it worked directly to get you what you asked for. As I matured, I realized that *thank you* worked similarly in the long term view of things, especially if you planned on returning to the same source with another request later on, but it was sometimes forgotten in favor of filling my mouth with candy or running to the destination that I had just asked *please please please can I go?*

So Thanksgiving rolls around and, whatever we may believe about God, it is an opportune time to remember those things for which we are grateful; to pause in our daily pursuits and remember our joys; to take an inventory of the many precious pieces of our life that we take for granted. New Years has its list of resolutions, Thanksgiving its list of blessings.

Some of us try, in various ways, to recall that list more regularly, to carry that spirit of thanksgiving throughout the year.

Every time I am sick, with a cold or the flu or whatever, as I wipe my sore nose and painfully swallow some more medicine, the thought comes into my infection-addled brain that once I feel better, *this time*, I will remember to appreciate the invaluable gift of good health every single day. Well, as you may have guessed, I most certainly do not remember to do that every single day...but, however infrequently, it does strike me sometimes, out of the blue, that I am feeling well, and I feel grateful for that moment.

Some people have told me that they have a ritual upon waking each morning: they run through a list in their minds of those things for which they are thankful as they start their day.

My mother-in-law would have us join hands before the evening meal and each say one thing for which we were thankful. A pretty good idea, I think. This attempt met with limited success, however. Not to point any fingers, but *I* would always dutifully take part, while her daughter and grandson—again, no names—they would issue groans of protest or simply sit in silence, stubbornly waiting out the period of thanksgiving, unwilling to voice their gratitude upon command.

And I guess, aside from good table manners, I understand their resistance. Gratitude is a personal thing; an unpredictable thing. It shows up when it wants and where it wants. Like Jesus says of the spirit or the wind in the Gospel of John, "[it] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." (John 3:8) We can certainly practice being grateful, at mealtime or morning or whenever, but ideally it will be a practice that we have initiated for ourselves, or, if it is a family or community tradition, one which we at least willingly signed onto. If thankfulness becomes a "should"—"you really *should* be more thankful"—it rather loses the spirit of thanksgiving.

But there is another piece to this, too. Though we often tie gratitude to specific things or circumstances or events or people, I don't think that the thanksgiving lists that we thus generate completely capture the deeper gratitude that sustains us, just as our list of New Years resolutions cannot fully explain what we wish for ourselves deep down inside. There is a wider thankfulness that is not tied to events or outcomes...or even happiness.

The book of Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures is a collection of prayers and songs, hymns if you will. But hymns like you may not hear in any church today. I was amazed to find, when I first studied them in theological school, that they were not the bland, reverent poems that I had imagined them to be.

Many of them are in a style known as *the lament*. Now, *lament* is a nice sort of poetic word...but *fierce*

complaint comes closer to describing some of these. *Outcry*, maybe. Many are prayers of petition, in that they are asking for help, divine intervention in times of trouble, but instead of asking only with the magic and polite *please*, the Psalmist often follows up with an almost accusatory *c'mon, you said!...you said you'd help me, you promised! Where are you!* And what is interesting about the lament is that it can move from intense pain and fear and anguish at God's apparent abandonment of the singer all the way to praise and thanksgiving in the space of a single Psalm, with no discernible change in the situation of the Psalmist. Now there are Psalms that are completely petitionary: "Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt." (Psalm 123:3) And there are Psalms that are praise and thanksgiving from start to finish: "Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them." (Psalm 111:2) And, most famously, there are Psalms of peaceful trust: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." (Psalm 23:1) But what intrigue me are these laments that carry one through a whole range of emotion and perspective in one Psalm. Psalm 22 begins: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1) and moves to "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." (Psalm 22:22) How does that happen? If nothing has changed with the circumstances of the Psalmist, if there is no indication that God has answered the prayer in any discernible fashion, how do we suddenly get to thanksgiving?

We all have our good days and bad days. On the bad days, sometimes—not all the time, by a long-shot, but sometimes—I retain enough perspective to know that I will climb out of whatever hole of despair that I am inhabiting. A new day will dawn, and I will feel differently. But that's *days* we're talking... The other morning, this whole process speeded up for me. I woke up feeling okay, but quickly moved to despair as it felt like the world was crumbling in around me. Nothing major, nothing phenomenally bad: a pile of paperwork and unanswered emails; computer malfunction; disruption in my planned schedule... There was just all of this *stuff*, and it felt like I would never get past all the frustrating, soul-stealing stuff. Everything became personal. The computer delighted in tormenting me. The pile of papers was purposely hiding everything I was looking for. The senders of email were all undoubtedly unjustly impatient as they awaited my responses. Jack ordered up a migraine headache just so I'd have to go pick him up from school and miss my scheduled morning appointment. After I unceremoniously tossed him a pillow as he collapsed on the couch, he said, "What's wrong?" I was frustrated by the question, even. But it gave me a short pause. Then, mustering all my powers of ministerial eloquence, I said, "I don't know...it's just everything...there's just all of this stuff!"

And the phone rang. It was my oldest brother. I still had so much to get done, but we talked. We must have talked for nearly an hour. As I hung up the phone, I realized that I was full of gratitude. I still had the same things to face in that day, yet I was thankful. The conversation did not stand out particularly from many other conversations we'd had; the news we talked about was not particularly joyous; in fact, we talked about his friend who'd been in a motorcycle accident; an aunt who was dying; family members who were upset with each other; the dismal state of the world in general...it was not particularly celebratory topics, there was nothing to be grateful *about* necessarily. And yet, as I hung up the phone, I was in a much different place than before I'd picked it up. The conversation had allowed me to connect once again with *my story*. Yes, it may be a crappy day, but it is a crappy day in the midst of my life, my life which is inextricably connected with so many other lives of people moving through their own days as best they can and trying to hang onto their *stories* and not get lost in the *stuff*...and I was

filled with gratitude for nothing in particular...and everything.

It strikes me that the Psalmist, shouting out his misery, is also putting it into the context of his (or her) own story. This is where I am. This is how I feel. That act in itself, even if it starts from sorrow and pain, can inspire gratitude. *Having* the blues is one thing, but *singing* the blues...*playing* the blues...that's quite another, right? I've never gotten the feeling that people *singing* the blues are feeling miserable. It is almost like, in their embrace of what inevitably *is*, they touch a deeper spring of gratitude.

"If the only prayer you ever say is 'thank you,'" wrote Meister Eckhart, "that is enough."

In my first year of confirmation—in the Lutheran church, confirmation classes happen in Junior High, preparing one to become a member of the church and, most excitingly at the time, allowing one to partake of the wine at communion—in my first year my teacher was someone who was truly passionate about her faith. She was (what at the time we called) a Charismatic. She believed in the baptism of the Holy Spirit; she spoke in tongues; she believed in healing...Needless to say, this Charismatic movement (and she was not alone) was shaking up the rather conservative, Midwestern Lutheran church I attended. I was very taken with it as it seemed to be so utterly captivating, so compelling, and so all-consuming in these people's lives. However much I differ with their theology at this point in my life, I am convinced that their religion was not for show...it was for real.

One of the books that this woman was particularly taken with at the time was called, *The Power of Praise*. It said, basically, that the best course of action was to praise God in all situations. Whether we find them good or bad, happy or sad, pleasant or painful or merely frustrating and annoying, we should, in all cases, praise the Lord. One of the examples used was an infestation of termites in the author's house. Instead of praying for them to be taken away, he and his family praised the Lord for these creatures and their presence in the house. The termites, we are told, disappeared in short order.

I see some worried expressions out there. You think I'm going to start urging you to praise the Lord soon, don't you? Some of you are calculating the distance to the exit...Let me explain why I tell this story. As I experienced my teacher at the time, she really did seem to be full of gratitude. I knew enough about her family (I went to school with her son and heard stories about her rocky marriage through the church-gossip grapevine...we don't have that here, but in *some* churches...) I knew enough about her family to know that her life was anything but trouble-free, and yet she seemed truly full of joy and acceptance. And I thought maybe this *Power of Praise* thing seemed to be a key to something...

Please understand what I am *not* saying.

I am *not* saying that praising the Lord will get rid of termites. (Besides, how sincere could they be about their praise if the real purpose was to *get rid* of the termites).

I am *not* saying that you should be grateful because everything that happens is God's will. I don't believe that. Frankly, if I thought that someone or something had that kind of direct control, I would be

something other than grateful for all of the suffering in this world...

I am *not* saying that you should be grateful because everything happens for a reason. For me, this is another form of the same idea, and while it may work well for some to view their own lives in those terms, it becomes a problem when this philosophy is turned outward. It can minimize our suffering. "I know you're in pain...but, well, you know it happened for a reason." Really...so then the burden is on *me*. I need to figure out *why*.

I am *not* saying that you should be grateful because everything can be justified in some theological or philosophical construct. It would be nice, but frankly I don't count on understanding everything in the sweet by and bye.

I am not saying that you should be grateful. Remember, *you should* has no place in gratitude.

I *am* asking you to think of those times when you are grateful for no apparent reason; when you, like Anne Sexton, find "joy in all;" when the only prayer you can imagine saying is "thank you," to God, or to life, to the laughter of the morning or the holy birds at the kitchen window, to all and more than all... there is strength in those moments and peace in that awareness and power in that acceptance. And this acceptance should not be confused with apathy. It is not a shrug of the shoulders, but an embrace of what is. It does not drain us of the power to change things for the better, but energizes us to do so.

"The wellspring of decency," says theologian Sharon Welch, "the wellspring of decency is loving this life in which people die, people suffer, there are limits, and we make mistakes...The ground of challenging exploitation, injustice, and oppression is not a vision of how the world could be or will be in the future in the reign of God, or after the revolution. The ground of challenging injustice is gratitude, the heartfelt desire to honor the wonder of that which is..." (*Sweet Dreams In America*, pgs. 135-6)

E.B. White [once said](#), "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This makes it hard to plan the day."

I think we who come here wish to do both, every day. And we suspect that these two desires are inextricably connected.

Happy Thanksgiving!

Closing Words (#708 – Isaiah 55:12)

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;

the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,

and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Go, now, in peace and great joy!