Greetings and Happy Thanksgiving!

By Pastor John Cotner

As summer gives way to the cool days and brisk nights of Fall, and the season of Thanksgiving comes hailing the advent of Christ the Lord, Joann and I are looking forward to a new chapter of life with y'all in Mission Valley. Likewise, I am humbled and excited to begin service in pastoral ministry to the body of Christ at Zion and the surrounding community!

First a little reflection: Thanksgiving is a blessed and wonderful American tradition, especially when understood in terms of our nation's shared ethnic history and Christian roots. During the civil war, President Abraham Lincoln recognized that the "needful diversion of wealth and strength from the field of peaceful industry to the national defense" had not depleted the land or the people's will. Lincoln also recognized that even in all the suffering of armed conflict between northern and southern states, God was still at work, growing the land's resources, restoring the population, and protecting the homeland from attack by foreign powers.

For Lincoln, these things were visible signs of God's providential care amid the travails and suffering of war. "No human counsel hath devised, nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things," Lincoln wrote. "They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy." Therefore, on October 3, 1863, President Lincoln issued a Proclamation "to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a Day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens."

Indeed, Lincoln did not give in to a root of bitterness, nor did he stray from trusting the LORD God. He knew that God is good and His mercies endure forever. He lived by faith not sight. He knew that Jesus is the rock of our salvation. Thus, Lincoln knew that it is good and salutary for the nation, in the midst of its sorrows and struggles, to give thanks for God's faithfulness in all circumstances. In the same spirit, let us look forward with anticipation to a blessed Thanksgiving this November 2026. In this spirit, I hope this brief devotion helps set a tone of prayerfulness and praise to the Lord for His faithfulness in all our trials and triumphs.

As Martin Luther explains, "The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ's death and resurrection so clearly – and pictures his kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom – that it might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible" (*The Lutheran Study Bible* 2009, 839). This means that the psalms are a divine treasury of prayers and praises to God that find application in our lives, just as the original psalmists communicated laments and thanksgivings on behalf of the people in ancient times.

That said, to stir our hearts toward thankfulness, here are a few verses from various psalms that overflow with gratitude to the LORD.

- *A Psalm of Thanksgiving. Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth.* (AB, Ps. 100:1)
- *Shout for joy to God our defender; sing praise to the God of Jacob!* (GNB, Ps. 81:1)
- *I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD.* (ESV, Ps. 116:17)
- *Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God!* (ESV Ps. 48:1)

Joann and I enjoy KFUO Radio's weekday program "Morning Prayer." It's a great way to start each day and is based on the morning prayer service given in our *Lutheran Service Book*. The liturgical chant titled *Venite*, meaning "come," serves as an invitation to worship. Subtitled "O Come, Let Us Sing," the Venite draws from verses 1-7 of Psalms 95. These verses convey a tone of jubilant thanksgiving to God.

> ***1*** *Oh come, let us sing to the Lord;*
> *let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!*
> ***2*** *Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;*
> *let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!*

Like the psalmist, who comes before God in faith, I encourage us to come into his presence by faith and with thanksgiving, making a joyful noise to our Savior and Lord Jesus, "the rock of our salvation."

In the wilderness, God provided the Israelites with manna from heaven and water from the rock. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, Paul connects the manna and rock to Jesus:

1 *For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,* ***2*** *and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,* ***3*** *and all ate the same spiritual food,* ***4*** *and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.*

Here, Paul recalls when God rescued the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery, parted the sea, and brought them safely beyond the threat of Pharoah's army, which perished. In the wilderness, God supplied water from a rock and bread from heaven. Truly, Jesus was their ever-present spiritual food and drink from heaven! For "the Rock was Christ." The preincarnate Lord Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Godhead, was present to provide for all their needs, and judged those who disobediently resisted God's good purposes for His people.

Further, Paul shows the Corinthians that these events are like Christian baptism, as he puts it in Titus 3:4-7,

4 *But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,* ***5*** *he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,* ***6*** *whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,* ***7*** *so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

Beloved ones, as Paul also explains in Romans 6, you were buried in Christ's death and raised to new life in His resurrection with the true hope of eternal life on the Last Day! Our Gracious Father has sealed you in Christ through baptism!

He is also our Risen Lord – true God and true man - who protects, cares, corrects, and guides us daily in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ is our Rock and Redeemer, "our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.an ever-present help in times of trouble" (Ps. 46:1). Whatever the circumstances that cause you stress or worry, "call on the name of the LORD," with "a sacrifice of

thanksgiving" (Psalm 116:17), for He will certainly do it! His faithfulness is worthy of our thanksgiving and praise in all of life's seasons and changes.

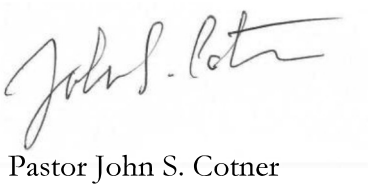
Thus, as the psalmist exclaims, "Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!" To sing unto the LORD is to recognize our need for God's love, mercy, and forgiveness every day. To sing unto the LORD is to acknowledge in my heart that God is God and I am not. For He is worthy of my worship above all things – come rain or shine. For "you will have no other gods before me," says the LORD.

What is more, to sing unto the LORD is a sure way to fight off the enemy's attacks! For where God is worshiped and glorified, no demon can tarry long. It must vanish! To sing unto the Lord is a pleasing aroma to our God, who loves us and keeps coming to heal and restore us through His Son Jesus, our Savior and Good Shepherd!

As we anticipate the Season of Thanksgiving – which itself leads straight into Advent and the Church's celebration of Christ's coming into the world at Christmas – let's join our hearts together by faith, thankful for our loving Lord's lovingkindness, ever watchful for His mighty works among us up ahead.

And my heart is filled with both gratitude and excitement to serve as your pastor, always seeking to honor our Lord Jesus in Word and Sacrament, soul care, and gospel mission. As the Psalmist proclaims, "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand." (Ps. 95:6-7).

In Christ's service,



Pastor John S. Cotner