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Celebrating God's Abundance

a sermon on Psalm 65

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I feel thankful this morning. I am thankful for opportunity to worship, for the church universal, for Westminster, for this sanctuary and all of you gathered here. I am thankful that I have the privilege of preaching this morning. I am thankful for my job; I have the best job, if not in the world, then at least the best job for me. I am thankful for my family, for my home, for a car that runs. For my health, for ample food and clean water. For plenty of good books. Most of all, I am thankful for the living Savior, Jesus Christ.

I don't know about you, but I am not always as thankful as I should be. I get caught up in the busyness of the weekly routine: people to visit, work to do, kids to get ready for school, this and that, running here and there. In the hurly burly I neglect to give thanks as I ought. Of course, when I stop and reflect, I always thank God for the blessings he pours out. But often I fail to see the plain truth right in front of me, as real and plentiful as the air I breathe. That truth is: God provides abundantly. Psalm 65 directs my attention to this truth, and it puts me in the mood to celebrate.

What about you? Are you glad to be here? Are you feeling thankful? Are you ready to celebrate? You should be. Psalm 65 reminds us how God provides abundantly. It gives us a list of reasons to celebrate!

1. God made you and a beautiful world for you to live in. You did not have to exist. You are unique. You are ideally suited to life on this planet, which is perfectly constructed to sustain life.
2. God gives you the things you need: water, food, shelter, clothing. I read recently about a village in Ethiopia where the girls do not go to school because they and the women walk hours each day to get water that is not what we would call clean but is at least drinkable. The boys don't go to school, either, because they are farming or caring for animals. A coup in Madagascar last year caused tourism and investment to dry up, and one result is many children are no longer in school. Many of us have been through hard times. Some of us are struggling through hard times right now. But so far as I know, no child in our church has dropped out of school to haul water or beg on the streets.

Of course, those children in Ethiopia and Madagascar are as precious to God as our children are. When people go hungry, it is not because there is not enough food to go around. It is because human greed gets in the way. God has given us a planet capable of sustaining a stunningly large population. Think of all the food produced and consumed each year. Think of the variety of it: the bounty of the sea, grains – drive through the Midwest and you will see oceans of wheat and corn, mile after mile – and don't forget fruits, vegetables, and dairy – such amazing variety. God cares for our needs.

3. God answers prayer. Not always the way we want, but he answers. He has purposes of his own that we do not understand, and because of this prayer is an act of faith. You have to trust God. But he does hear, and he does answer.

4. God has given you a Savior. Verse 3 says God forgives our trespasses. The original Hebrew actually says God *atones* our trespasses. What does that mean? It means he pays the price himself. He makes it right – through Jesus Christ and his death on the cross.

5. God has made you his own: “Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts.” You may think that you are here today by your own choice, and in one sense of course you are, for God does not coerce us; he works with our will. But it would be more accurate to say you are here by his design. He chose you before you chose him. He loved you. He made himself known to you – or maybe that's what he's doing right now. He claimed you as his own.

Those are five pretty good reasons to celebrate! I know not all of you feel like celebrating. Many have heavy hearts. You fear the future, worrying about money or your health or both. You have pain, in body or soul or both. You feel guilty; or you feel overwhelmed by temptation, and you're not sure you can hold out. You grieve.

These things are important. They matter. You will never hear me simply dismiss the problems of life as if everything is perfect, so let's all be happy. I am not telling you to be happy. I am calling you to celebrate. There's a big difference. You don't have to be happy to celebrate. Sometimes a celebration is just what a burdened heart needs, especially if you have a good reason to celebrate. Psalm 65 says we do. The Psalms are nothing if not realistic. You find every emotion there, even bitterness and anger with God. The Psalms express the deepest anguish of the human heart, but they also testify that God is faithful. He is good. He provides abundantly. And so we have something to celebrate, and maybe that's just what we need. ...

I confess that I felt apprehensive preparing this sermon. Psalm 65 is a dynamic song. It was written to be sung and prayed. It lives and breathes. I don't want to kill it and pin it down and dissect it like a frog in biology class. Too many sermons do that. They take

the living words of God and suck the life out of them. This song is meant to be lived. I want us to live it! ... And then I realized ... that is exactly what we are doing in worship.

The hymns we are singing this morning are not so different from this psalm. We praise God, our Creator and Redeemer. Our prayers are not so different from this psalm. Our prayer of confession echoes the confession in the psalm. Everything we are doing in worship acts out the words of Psalm 65. Isn't that exciting? That's the way it should be. God is God, and worship is worship whether you are in the Temple in Jerusalem 2,800 years ago or in our sanctuary this morning. In our words and actions we are making this prayer our own.

But ... there are two things in particular that we are doing this morning to celebrate God's abundance. Two acts that flow out of glad and joyful hearts. Two expressions of our faith and hope and love for God. Two ways we give thanks for all the blessings God has given. One of them is the Lord's Supper. The other is the offering.

I thought that would get your attention, the offering. "Is this some kind of stealth stewardship sermon?" you wonder. Not really. Not that there's anything wrong with stewardship. All it means is living your life as if everything you have belongs to God — because it does. That's not what this passage is about, though. It is about celebrating God's abundance, and giving is one of the best ways we do that.

When your heart is full of gratitude, when you are consciously aware of all the blessings God has given you, you tend to feel generous. At least, you ought to. On the other hand, you tend to feel stingy when you are afraid. You are afraid you won't have enough. Afraid the blessings that have always sustained you will dry up. Fear drives stinginess. Faith drives giving. If you really trust God to take care of you, you won't be afraid. You will feel joyful and generous, and you will share the blessings you have been given.

Are you afraid? All of us worry about the future. That's natural. But fear and worry should not control us. They should not drive our behavior. That's no way to live. So which is stronger in your heart: worry about the future or confidence in God? Your generosity is a pretty good measure of your gratitude and faith.

The offering as an act of worship makes perfect sense. God is good to us. God provides abundantly. We are going to feel thankful. That gratitude in our hearts will start looking for ways to get out. Giving something back to God is a great way to do that. This has always been true in every time and place. In ancient Israel, when they still offered sacrifices, they had something called a thank offering. The book of Leviticus describes it [7.11-18]. They had sacrifices for all sorts of things, like guilt offerings for sin. Some offerings were mandatory. The thank offering was not. It was entirely

voluntary, something brought by the giver out of sheer gratitude for God's goodness. If you felt grateful to God, you could bring a sacrifice, and the priest would offer it as a burnt offering. Certain parts were burned up, other parts were for the priest, and still other parts were for the one who gave it. So the thank offering was like a very holy bar-b-que with extended family gathered around to share in the feast. I think our psalm hints at this in verse 4 when it says, "We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house." They were singing a song of praise, bringing a thank offering, and ready to share in the feast that followed. God has always been a fan of meals.

The psalm mentions vows, so I feel I ought to explain those. Back then, people got into the habit of thanking God in advance by making a vow. For example, a person might pray, "If I recover from this illness, Lord, I will bring a thank offering." At its best, a vow could be an expression of genuine gratitude, *but* there is a *big* danger here, because this easily turns into offering God a bribe. I am sure God is offended by bribes, as if (a) God needed incentive to be kind to us, or (b) we had anything God wanted anyway. The idea in our psalm is, God is so good that those who have made vows will joyfully fulfill them.

By the way, there is a difference between a vow and a pledge. We pledge our giving every year at this church. A pledge says, "I will give God this amount in the coming year." The main purpose is to help the session plan a careful budget. A vow adds a condition, "Here is what I will give *if* God does thus and so." Pledging is good. Vows we should avoid, because we don't place conditions on God. We don't need to. He loves us. He is good and kind and faithful. He will take care of us in the way that best ensures his goal for us: to bring us to eternal life and make us like Jesus. He may not give us the things we want or keep us in the style we would prefer. But he is good to us, and his goodness should make a difference in our attitudes and behavior. If it doesn't, then we are criminally ungrateful.

The other way our gratitude gets out is the Lord's Supper. When you eat and drink it, Jesus says to you: "I died for you. Your sins are forgiven." That's God's promise, and he seals it on our hearts through this sacrament. God gave us to Lord's Supper because he knows our faith is weak. He knows it needs all the help it can get. So he gave us his Word, and there is nothing wrong with his Word. That alone should be enough. The problem is with us. Our faith tends to stumble along. So to his Word he added the sacrament. To let you know: His body was given *for you*. His blood was shed *for you*. Your sins are forgiven.

When you eat and drink, you are celebrating God's grace. You give thanks for Christ's death and the forgiveness of your sins. Some churches call this the Eucharist. That's a biblical word. It is Greek for "thanksgiving." It comes from the institution of the Supper when Jesus *gave thanks* and broke the bread.

I am going to give you the same instruction I gave the children: When you eat the bread, pray, "Thank you, Lord Jesus, for dying for me." When you drink the cup, pray, "Thank you, Lord Jesus, for forgiving my sins."

God is so good to us that his generosity includes ways for us to express our gratitude. We do that all the time in worship, but two of the best ways are the offering and the Lord's Supper. Generous giving and eating the Supper make our hearts grateful and joyful. God provides abundantly. And that's something worth celebrating. Amen.

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