

Before Thanksgiving a teacher was describing to her second graders the hardships of the Pilgrims during their first winter. She especially emphasized the shortage of food and clothing. In the midst of her story a little boy raised his hand and exclaimed, “Too bad my mommy wasn’t there. She always knows what to do!”¹

This year many are not certain what to do. Even the best of moms may wonder if they should have a family Thanksgiving dinner, knowing the risk of bringing people together during the coronavirus.

That will be disappointing for many of us, for the traditions of Thanksgiving offer comfort: favorite foods served every year, sitting at a familiar table, gathering with extended families, taking a nap after the meal.

This year’s Thanksgiving will be different. Some gatherings will not occur. Some family members may have died due to the microscopic virus. Many are filled with anxiety and uncertainty. Normal patterns have been disrupted, and many long for a return to the good ole days from just a year ago.

I’ve heard some suggest that “If only…” and then they suggest how life might be better if only

such and such would occur. When I hear these comments, I’m reminded of a poem by Rudyard Kipling. The writer is best known for his Jungle Book stories, but in the early 1900s he wrote a poem to his son entitled “If,” which in part says:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all [others] doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating,
And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise…

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all…count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!²

Kipling encouraged his son, that even when those around him seemed to be falling apart, that he could still treat others with respect and kindness. In these difficult times that we face, I think these words can

2

bring us hope as well. It's tempting to lash out in anger when we can't do the things we used to do. Some may want to blame others for the virus, while others get caught up in political conspiracy theories.

I suggest that we put aside all the bitterness and anger during this week of Thanksgiving. Give yourself a break from the mounting news reports of deaths, from the ranting and raving of social media posts, and instead focus on gratitude for what we *do* have, remembering Kipling's words about talking with others, "If you can...keep your virtue...nor lose the common touch."

In his heyday, it is said that every word Kipling wrote was worth twenty-five shillings. Hearing this, a group of college students got together and wrote him a letter that said, "We understand that every word you write is worth twenty-five shillings. Enclosed is twenty-five shillings; send us your best word." A couple of days later, these college students received a telegram from Mr. Kipling. The telegram consisted of one word. That one word, his best word, was "Thanks!"³

Thanks. Such a simple word, and yet, one that carries so much meaning. Even when life seems to be falling apart, this word offers us hope. The word reminds us to celebrate what we do have rather than stressing over what we do not have.

I think the prophet Jeremiah would agree, for even though he found himself living in desperate times, his words of hope have continued to echo throughout the past 2600 years. Prophets had been using the spoken word for many generations to bring a message from God, but Jeremiah took an extra step by bringing a *written* word in addition to the spoken word. He asked his scribe Baruch to write in a scroll the words God delivered to Jeremiah, which provided a more tangible message of hope.

Since Jeremiah had been banned from the temple, he asked Baruch to read the scroll in the temple courtyard. When those gathered in the courtyard heard Baruch reading the scroll, they said, "The king needs to hear these words!"

Baruch gave the scroll to the king's officials, and as the king sat next to a roaring fireplace in his palace listening to the reading of the scroll, the king cut off

portions of the scroll and tossed them into the fire. Here we have one of the earliest cases of book burning, or in this case, scroll burning—trying to get rid of the words with which one disagrees. When Jeremiah learned of the king’s rude response, the prophet was not pleased!

Jeremiah wrote the words on another scroll, but surely there must be a better way of getting God’s words into the hearts of the people. Wait! That’s it! Words into the hearts of the people!

God came up with a new plan, a way of writing a new covenant that could not be burned in the fire. It wouldn’t be written on stone tablets that could crumble with age or be smashed on the ground. God had a better idea for helping us remember God’s teachings and told Jeremiah:

I will put my Instructions within them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. They will no longer need to teach

¹ Hodgkin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #922.

each other to say, “Know the LORD!” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins.⁴

In a time when God’s people were being taken into exile into a strange land, forcibly removed from their homes, God offered a portable way of helping them remember to trust God—by writing God’s promises and teachings on their hearts. Better than stone or scrolls or paper, God’s heart-written teachings have been passed down through generations of hardship and still reside within us. When faced with the chaos of today, look within yourself. Listen. Trust. Sense God’s presence stirring within you. Give thanks not only for the turkey and stuffing this week, but also give thanks for God’s teachings written on your heart.

² Rudyard Kipling, “If-,” in *Rewards and Fairies* (New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 200–201.

³ Hodgkin, Michael; *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #927.

⁴ Jeremiah 31:33-34.