

Psalm 65

Overflowing with Thanks

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\*Title slide

Bringing order and cleanliness to my surroundings brings me tremendous comfort and even joy. And I know exactly why. Cleaning and organizing things allows me to maintain the illusion of being in control. When there are things in life that I desperately want to control and I can't, our home is spotless. This way of dealing with life has earned me a reputation in our family. If someone needs to get wax out of carpet or grease out of a dress shirt, they call me. And if something is missing, everyone immediately assumes I have thrown it away in the midst of a cleaning frenzy. And yes, I am the person who threw out my kids' artwork after it was displayed on the refrigerator for a week.

Over the last couple of months, I have had a number of opportunities to use my well-honed gifts of cleaning and reorganizing, so much so that I am, maybe for the first time, weary. It started in September when we moved everything except the furniture out of one of our guest bedrooms in preparation for our youngest son, Andrew, to stay with us for a little while. The room has a big closet, which housed the overflow from my own closet. So, in order to empty that closet, I had to reorganize my closet so it didn't require overflow. Have you ever noticed that reorganizing one area of the house usually requires work in other areas?

Here at church we've been working hard to tidy up. We are nearing the end of the nursery remodel (you should go look at it) which required painting (thank you Jenny Downey and Bret Prideaux), moving and sorting toys...and moving them again. Last week, during the church

clean-up, there was cleaning, organizing, repurposing, and negotiating for coveted storage space. We are also nearing the end of the projects associated with that. And back at home this week, Andrew moved into his new place which required more cleaning and further reorganization, which will end in getting his vacated room ready for grandchildren who will arrive, with their parents, for Thanksgiving in 3 days!!!

Having acquired an additional bookshelf for my office during the clean-up day, I spent some time this week bringing order to what was previously stacks of books and files, some of which other people have given me as a result of their own purging. While doing that, I wondered why my tendency to get rid of things has not been applied to seminary papers. I still have binders and files full of them. I even have the digital files for every single paper I ever wrote, but for some reason, I am unable to part with the hard copies. While I was trying to talk myself into recycling them, I ran across a paper I wrote on the topic of sin and why it matters from a theological perspective. It was brilliant (LOL)! While skimming the paper, I read what the section about corporate sin and what a communal acknowledgement of sin looks like. Coincidentally, I used today's text as an example of that in the ancient world. Imagine the people gathered at the temple following a long-awaited bountiful harvest:

\*This is Psalm 65:

Praise is due to you,

O God, in Zion;

and to you shall vows be performed,

<sup>2</sup>O you who answer prayer!

To you all flesh shall come.

<sup>3</sup>When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,  
you forgive our transgressions.

<sup>4</sup>Happy are those whom you choose and bring near

to live in your courts.

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,  
your holy temple.

<sup>5</sup> By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,  
O God of our salvation;  
you are the hope of all the ends of the earth  
and of the farthest seas.

<sup>6</sup> By your strength you established the mountains;  
you are girded with might.

<sup>7</sup> You silence the roaring of the seas,  
the roaring of their waves,  
the tumult of the peoples.

<sup>8</sup> Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;  
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.

<sup>9</sup> You visit the earth and water it,  
you greatly enrich it;  
the river of God is full of water;  
you provide the people with grain,  
for so you have prepared it.

<sup>10</sup> You water its furrows abundantly,  
settling its ridges,  
softening it with showers,  
and blessing its growth.

<sup>11</sup> You crown the year with your bounty;  
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

<sup>12</sup> The pastures of the wilderness overflow,  
the hills gird themselves with joy,

<sup>13</sup> the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,  
the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
they shout and sing together for joy.

This psalm is a psalm of thanksgiving. The gathered people's gratitude begins, not with thanks for the abundant harvest, but for God's

forgiveness. There is a communal acknowledgement of unnamed corporate sins (“When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us...”) for which the whole community had undoubtedly suffered. Remember last week we talked about how the ancient Israelites connected their relationship with God to what was going on in their lives. If there wasn’t enough food or water, or if they were at war, it meant that God was disappointed or angry with them. Everything happened for a reason and when bad things happened, it was because they had been unfaithful.

This psalm was written in response to the end of a difficult time, likely a period of drought and/or famine. While in the midst of the drought, the people would have vowed to do better, to be more faithful, if only they had rain, if only they had enough to eat. So, when the rain returned, a sign that God had not abandoned them, the people went together to the temple to make good on their vows, to assert their faithfulness. This was what was expected.

While the psalmist doesn’t share the details of their sins, he makes no secret about God’s forgiveness and the people’s response to forgiveness. They acknowledged God, not only as the one who has the capacity to forgive, but as awe-inspiring creator and generous, reliable provider. They understood the restoration of creation and subsequent overflowing abundance as signs and measures of God’s forgiveness and readiness to give them another chance. Because of God’s forgiveness, now they had grain and animals to sacrifice at the temple. Now there was abundance and not scarcity. Now there was life and joy.

In order to really understand this psalm, we have to be able to imagine a situation that, for us, is difficult to wrap our heads around. We have to imagine that an entire community of people could, first of all, agree on what sin is. And then all of those people would have to agree that

they were each complicit in a specific, communal sin *and* be willing to turn from it. Can we imagine that?

Since this text is dealing with a community of people who share the same faith, let's make it easier for us to imagine. Can we imagine a scenario in which every single Christian in Bartlesville would come together to acknowledge their own participation in the same corporate sin? If you could imagine such an occurrence, what would you hope the confession would be?

Climate change?

Poverty?

Inhumane treatment of Immigrants?

What do you imagine that occasion would be like? Where would we be gathered? Would the corporate confession be in the form of some sort of liturgy projected onto a screen or would it be more spontaneous? More importantly, what would it be like for every person to really know forgiveness and to feel the power of a new beginning? And what would this community (or even the world) be like as a result of every single Christian in this community turning from that shared sin and changing our behavior? Imagine that.

This psalm begins with a dutiful response to God for alleviating the people's suffering. But as the psalm continues, duty gives way to awe which culminates in an extravagant, over the top display of joyous celebration and praise. Maybe this psalm comes along today to remind us that to grow in gratitude is to become more and more the fulfillment of who God has created us to be: To move from being merely dutiful toward becoming what we have longed to be. Maybe we long to be vulnerable, to bravely admit when we have done the wrong thing, to be given a chance to try again. Maybe we long, just for a little while, to forget about what's on the news and to allow ourselves to experience

awe as the sun rises or as we look in the distance at the beauty of the mountains. And maybe we long to be the kind of people who practice gratitude by becoming more aware of our own abundance and sharing it with others.

To become who we were created to be is to bear extravagantly the fruits of justice, generosity and joy. The psalm's imagery speaks of a response to God that holds nothing back, allowing our whole lives to become expressions of gratitude. So, here we are just a few days before we set aside an entire day, supposedly to reflect on gratitude, what might this psalm inspire in us today? How might our whole lives be an expression of gratitude like this psalm imagines?

\* For me, the images of abundance this psalm conveys paint a picture in my mind of what I consider the very best of Thanksgiving. I picture people, worn out from life, gathered together around tables. Let's be honest, some of the people gathered around our Thanksgiving tables are there, not because they want to be, but because of a sense of duty. But they are there. The tables are set for a meal and piled high with food. Messiness is happening all around. There's the guy telling bad jokes, the woman with too much perfume, the children who have already licked the frosting off of the corner of your favorite dessert. There's a place for everyone, even the ones who have control issues, the ones who struggle to sit still or the ones who chew with food in their mouths. It's chaos. Sometimes it's hard. And it's beautiful.

The acts of gathering around a table, making room for one more, embracing the ones who are different from us, sharing what we have... are acts of gratitude. They are the essence of who I believe God's created us to be and who we long to be. The table we gather around here is the center of our life together and our coming to it each week is an act of gratitude, for God and for each other. So, it seems fitting

today that it also be the place where we acknowledge at least some of what and who we are thankful for. In your bulletins, you will find a table place card that says, "I am thankful for \_\_\_\_\_." I invite you to fill out the place card and bring it with you to the communion table. Together, let us load the table to overflowing with our gratitude. Amen.