

2024 1 Thess 3:9-13

God, in Exodus, gives his name to Moses at the burning bush. I Am who I am. God is the One who Is, Yahweh. He is the essential exister. We know we aren't God for a number of reasons but one of those is, when we die, the world keeps on going. The rest of existence is not tied to our existence.

This is not the case for God. He is the One outside of space and time who creates it and continues to uphold it by his transcendental power. If there is no I AM, there is no anything. He is the One who Is. And so we can get rid of the silly little games where we think God is just the highest rung on the ladder, with cockroaches, worms, patriots fans, cats, dogs, people, angels, and then God is just another rung up. Not at all. Not even close. Everything, everything else is created, comes from his creative word. He is not the top rung of the ladder, he made the ladder, he is holy, which means he is wholly different, and stands alone. The I AM.

All things are from him, and return to him.

I bring this up because of our Thessalonians text. Look at how each aspect of it either is from God or returns to God. "What thanksgiving can we return to God for you..." Paul and his workers received a gift, the Thessalonians who (by God's grace) faithfully received the word of God. Paul and the workers received and so they return thanks. From God to God.

And so they pray, to God, that this gift might continue, even as their joy remains before God, who gave the gift.

Verse 11 it continues to flow from God as they long that He would direct their way back to the Thessalonians to see them again. They long to receive that gift from God, if it be His will. "And may the Lord make you increase..." And so they pray the Lord would continue to give to the

Thessalonians in their absence. That HE, God, may establish their hearts at the coming of the Lord.

The Coming of the Lord... and so here we are in advent. As we meditate on the mystery of The I AM outside space and time, coming into space and time to redeem it. And we meditate on his promise to come once more, to make it all new on the second coming.

And in these meditations perhaps we can reflect on this simple truth again: that it all comes from God, and returns to him.

We talked a bit about the Church Calendar in Bible class last week, and though this is a tradition, I think it still invites us to see this pattern. He comes first, advent, Christmas, he reveals himself to be the Savior, epiphany. We respond (or return to him) in humility, lent, he gives forgiveness and life everlasting, easter, we respond in sharing that Good news by the gift of his Spirit, Pentecost. And whether one follows that calendar or not we see this same pattern in the scriptures.

He creates, he calls his people, he calls Abram, he sends the prophets, his work! And then, of course, he sends a Savior, we return praise for that Savior. He sends us his gifts freely, we return thanks and respond in freely sharing that love with our neighbors. He gives us life here, he gives us eternal life, we return to him that we may serve him in joy and celebration. We receive from God, we return back to him.

The trouble arises when we ignore or usurp this pattern. And so we push back against God's gifts, and think they are inadequate, so "I will eat that fruit he told us not to (even though he gave me every other tree), and we will be like him!" Oh no you won't. You aren't the I AM, He is.

And it's the same with all our discontent, "Did you lead us out here to die in the wilderness,

God?” Even though daily bread was given to them each day! And has God not given us, each day, more than enough? And yet how often do we return complaints instead of thanks to him?

And in so doing we are tempted to substitute other things, idols, into the role of the one who gives and receives. “This block of wood will give me what I need! I will receive from it and return to it my thanksgiving!” And, of course, we don’t bow to many blocks of wood but do we put money, or healthcare, or a politician, into that role? “Yes this will give me all I need! All I need flows from it, my meaning, my security, my hope.” But we see this trap right? All things do not flow from these things that are not God. And even those things that are blessings, - money, medicine, and the like - those flow from God! How could anything on the ladder ever replace the Creator, the I Am? How could anything give as much?

The reality is someday you will realize the substitutes can’t save you. And then what are you left with? Despair and depression. The world says: “Well there is no God I’m too smart for that, I know this all got here by accident it didn’t come from anything, nor did I, I am overgrown stardust and look my youth is gone, my money (which I thanked the universe for) can’t bring peace, and the medicine can’t do anything more for me. What now? I guess this is just the cycle and my part in it is over and it all heads to darkness now...” This is what our children are taught and we wonder why depression is on the rise! It is a confession that says we come from nothing, are meaningless accidents and we return to nothing.

I am preaching to the choir here, I realize, you are not idolators, that’s not my point. Though I do think, because I see this struggle in myself, that we can sometimes compartmentalize the gifts of God. We think things like, “Sure God gives me eternal life, but I had to pull myself up by my own bootstraps,” or “if it weren’t for my kids, or my spouse, id be lost!” Well, ok, but does the thanksgiving stop on just those rungs of the ladder? Or can we begin to see and return thanks, to

the one who gave us those gifts of spouse and kids and bootstraps? So as before, if you fail to see how all things are from God and to God, you can err on one side to despair, you can also err on the otherside and find pride or incomplete praise.

Consider again our Thessalonians text: Paul could have said, “WE gave you these gifts Thessalonians! If it wasn’t for us making our way to you and sharing the Gospel, you’d be lost! And we must have done a good job because you responded correctly to us!” But that is not what he says at all is it? “God gave us to you and you to us. And he turned your hearts to believe, and what joy that he has given us these gifts – lets return thanks!”

And so here in advent we have a time to reflect on God’s creation, his promise to send a redeemer, his grace to forgive us sinners, his great victory he wins for us, and his gifts he gives us each day. He gives all that freely. He made freely, he pays the price for redemption and calls us to be his own freely. By his first action.

How then could we ever say it is earned? That would usurp all of this would it not? How could we ever say we are good enough or done enough or are sincere enough? Enough for what? To warrant some action out of him? As if we give first to him and then he returns to us? No! He is the I AM, he doesn’t owe anyone anything. And to say we earn our salvation or that we deserve his gifts tosses that all upside down. He gives, he is first, we return.

We are the clay, he is the potter, he is the I AM we are not. Which means we can also, and this is hard, we can also say, that even the crosses he lays upon us, even when he gives or takes away, can we as undeservers, can we say “Thy will be done?” Can we return thanks for even that, not that he wills sin, no, he doesn’t, but can we say in blessing or bane, plenty or lack, God is still the one to be praised for his justice just as much as his mercy?

If that's hard. And I think it is at times. Consider once more, a creation he longed to make so that he might share his love forever. A creation that didn't deserve redemption, but justice, and yet a love so great that he would take the justice upon himself, along with a cross, and pain, and rejection. That he might overcome it for us. Consider his victory over death (and what else offers that!), and a share in that victory he gives to us who are dust and so fleeting? That our ultimate fate, by his grace is not to return to stardust, no! But, as we have stated, to be from him, in his image, and return to him in a resurrection! And consider how this promise and work came through the evil brokenness and pain of his cross. Can he not work through your crosses to bring about good? Yes he can. And he has promised it in Romans 8:28 – can we cling to that promise, can we cling to his cross, when ours seem so difficult and hopeless? By His Spirit, you can. Because again, it's all from him, and to him.

May we this advent and always remember The King, the I Am, comes. Why? To redeem you, that you, even if through cross and trial, might be his forevermore.

There is then no question of earning. It has already been given and promised.

There is a question of response. Can we cherish his gifts? Can we share his love? Can we return praise and return to the cross in time of need or failing? Yes. So many times, yes.

We love because he first loved us. He has shown that love in Jesus, he has promised it is for you in his word, and shown it is for you in sacrament. Rejoice. And consider what thanksgiving can we return to God for these gifts?

Romans 11:26 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.