

What was I thinking?

for Sunday, November 22, 2020



Giving Thanks

I still remember the night of our last in-person Session meeting back in March. We were just beginning to try to make sense of this new virus and what it might mean for us, our church, our community. I think it's safe to say we had no idea. For our time of worship just before the meeting, Ryan asked me to choose two hymns to sing. One of them was *Now Thank We All Our God*. I don't remember why, but Ryan asked me to talk about why I chose that hymn. Maybe I'm wrong, but I thought I sensed a bit of regret on Ryan's face as I started telling the story. I wondered myself if it was a bit too much.

Martin Rinkart, the writer of the words of *Now Thank We All Our God*, was born in 1586, the son of a cooper, in Eilenburg, Saxony. He was a scholar and chorister at St. Thomas' School in Leipzig (where Bach served and taught, though not at that time). Rinkart went on to study theology at the university and earned a Master of Arts degree. He became a cantor (music director), then a pastor, and in 1617 he was invited by the town council to be archdeacon of Eilenburg where he stayed for thirty-two years. Most of that was during the Thirty Years' War. Eilenburg was a walled city and people came from miles around seeking refuge. The result was overcrowding, famine, and plague. In 1637 the superintendent left, and two other pastors died. Rinkart was left alone to minister to the city. Sometimes he conducted burial services for forty to fifty people in a single day. His own wife died and he became ill himself but survived. Even after all he had done, Martin Rinkart received little gratitude from the city authorities, and they even harassed him in later years. He died on December 8, 1649.

As I told this story, I looked at Ryan and he seemed to cringe. I don't know for sure, but it seemed he was thinking, "This is a bit extreme and gruesome. Things aren't going to be that bad." We had no idea that night what our pandemic was going to turn into.

What does all of this have to do with the hymn? In the midst of all that Martin Rinkart was going through, with all the trouble and loss and grief around him, he somehow found it in himself to write this hymn. (He wrote it in German, but we have the English translation):

Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms, hath blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

"Who wondrous things hath done?" "Hath blessed us on our way?" How could someone in such a miserable situation write those words? I don't know, but he set a good example by doing it. Another thing unusual about the hymn, which we usually hear sung in big gatherings, often around Thanksgiving, is that he didn't write it as a congregational hymn. He wrote it as a prayer to be sung by his children before meals at home. Worshiping and singing hymns at home. Imagine that! And he did it without a livestream too.

THANKSGIVING HYMNS
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Now Thank We All Our God

NUN DANKET ALLE GOTT 6.7.6.7.6.6.6.6

Martin Rinkart, c. 1636
Trans. Catherine Winkworth, 1858; alt.
Stanza 3, *Rejoice in the Lord*, 1985

Harm. adapt. *Lobegesang*, Felix Mendelssohn, 1846
Johann Crüger, 1664

1. Now thank we all our God With heart and hands and voice - est,
2. O may this boun - teous God Through all our life be near us,
3. All praise and thanks to God, Who reigns in high - est heav - en.

Who won - drous things hath done, In whom this world re - joic - es,
With ev - er joy - ful hearts And bless - ed peace to cheer us,
To Fa - ther and to Son And Spir - it now be giv - en.

Who, from our moth - ers' arms, Hath blessed us on our way
And keep us in God's grace, And guide us when per - plexed,
The one e - ter - nal God, Whom heaven and earth a - dore.

Some great music, and words meant to be sung, have been written in very dark times. Herbert Zipper was a composer and conductor from Vienna. He could have become a great and famous orchestral conductor, but Hitler marched into Austria and Herbert Zipper ended up in a concentration camp at Dachau. He was among prisoners mourning the loss of their normal lives, doing back-breaking work, and being treated horribly. One night Herbert started reciting poetry by Goethe and he noticed fellow prisoners taking notice. Another prisoner joined him. They continued doing this at night, and a crowd started to gather to listen. Many of the prisoners were workers and farmers. They were not educated and couldn't read or write, but they appreciated and took comfort in Herbert's reciting of poetry.

Then they started making instruments out of whatever kind of scraps they could find, and they started to play music. These prisoners were shoveling mounds of garbage and many of them died and were buried in it. Civilized life was taken from them, but they discovered in music and poetry a connection to life within themselves.

Zipper began composing music. He volunteered for latrine duty because he would have the most solitude during the day. He kept pails of dirty toilet water and excrement close by and if a guard came, he slopped the buckets onto the floor and started to mop it all back up again, but it caused such an odor that the guard would go away.

Herbert's father escaped and bribed Nazi officials to get Herbert out too. He went to Paris, and then London. He got a job conducting the Manila Symphony, but the Japanese invaded the Philippines and he ended up a Japanese prisoner-of-war. He became one of few imprisoned on both sides of the war. Herbert escaped and became a spy. The Americans liberated Manila but battle destroyed most of the city and killed many of the people. Herbert decided music was needed again. He had arranged for the Filipino musicians to hide their instruments in basements out in the country. He got the surviving musicians and their instruments together and he informed General MacArthur there was going to be a concert in the bombed-out shell of the Santa Cruz Cathedral. They performed Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony and Dvorak's *New World* Symphony.

Herbert came to America and conducted in Brooklyn, Chicago, and Los Angeles. He brought music to the inner-city schools. He became an advocate for the arts. He went to teach in China and was in a hotel in Tiananmen Square when the army moved in to stop demonstrators in 1989.

In *The Art of Is*, Stephen Nachmanovitch wrote about Herbert Zipper's story. Nachmanovitch explains, "The arts are not frosting on life; they aren't an extra little entertaining piece that you add in when everything else is taken care of. Art is life itself."

So, out of the darkness comes light. Out of sorrow, sickness, and death can come thanks. As Dumbledore told Harry Potter, "Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light."

Other music this Sunday

Hymns: Back when I was planning for this coming Sunday, I was aware that it was the Sunday before Thanksgiving. I like Thanksgiving and wanted to at least acknowledge it with a hymn and maybe an organ piece. As I looked at the scriptures for this coming Sunday, I didn't come up with very many good options for hymns or other music that really fit. We'll hear in scripture about Jesus breaking the bread and sharing the cup. Not exactly cornbread and cranberry sauce (though we have been

improvising at home on communion Sundays). The main text is about God's promise of a New Covenant to Jeremiah. As I read about the house of Judah avoiding disaster by turning from their evil ways and being forgiven, and God saying, "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." I looked again at the Thanksgiving hymns, which included these phrases: "Gather thou thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin," and "Thou, Lord, was at our side; all glory be thine!" and "And keep us in God's grace, and guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills in this world and the next." They just seemed to fit. So, Thanksgiving it is. We'll sing *Come, Ye Thankful People, Come* and *We Gather Together*.

Solo:

Kendall will sing English Baroque composer Maurice Greene's *Thou Visitest the Earth*.

Organ music: The prelude will be an improvised set of variations on ST. GEORGE'S WINDSOR (the tune for *Come, Ye Thankful People, Come*). Something about nearing the end of a semester reminds me of being in school and the final exam for organ improvisation class. We were to choose a tune and play a set of variations, demonstrating the different improvisation techniques we learned in the class. After all this time, I still feel obliged to do it again. The postlude (dare I say this?) is a sinfonia (instrumental introduction) from a cantata Bach wrote for a celebration after an election, but that's not why I'm playing it. I first heard it when my first organ teacher practicing it for a Thanksgiving service at Reid Memorial in Augusta. Kate and I also had it played by a string quartet at our wedding, and it was the postlude I planned to play in 2011 to celebrate Aiden's birth. That didn't quite work out, because he was born on the day I was to play it and I missed the service. The cantata has the title *We Thank You, God, We Thank You*. It's a celebratory piece and appropriate for many reasons.

Life isn't easy these days. There's a lot of grief. But, even in the darkest times, hopefully we can find it in ourselves to give thanks.

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SINFONIA FROM CANTATA NO. 29
Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir

4,00

Grand-Chœur sans 16 P. à tous les claviers.
Pos. ou Récit accouplé au Gd.-O.
PEDALE: Fonds de 16, 8 et 4 P. (Anches préparés).
Tirasse du Récit et du Pos.

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH
1685-1750

Arranged by Alexandre Guilmant

Presto. (♩ = 110.)

MANUALS

PEDALS

God be with you till we meet again.

John