

**Palm Harbor United Methodist Church**  
**Rev. Cathy Hart**  
**Grateful Hearts**  
**11/22/20**

*Though the fig tree does not bud  
and there are no grapes on the vines,  
though the olive crop fails  
and the fields produce no food,  
though there are no sheep in the pen  
and no cattle in the stalls,  
<sup>18</sup> yet I will rejoice in the LORD,  
I will be joyful in God my Savior. (Habbakuk 3:17-18)*

*<sup>34</sup> Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his love endures forever. (1 Chronicles 16:34)*

This is a day of thanks. I am thankful to be worshipping with those of you who are here in the sanctuary, and those of you who are at home. I am thankful for the creative team who put this beautiful altar together for our Thanksgiving service. I am thankful for our staff and the many volunteers who work so hard to keep the ministries of PHUMC going and our worship and arts team for leading us this morning in worship to God. I am thankful for family and friends, and though we won't be together this holiday as we usually are, we are together in heart and spirit. But most importantly, I am thankful for our God, who loves us so much that He gave us the gift of his Son Jesus and pours out his love and grace through the Holy Spirit. Our scripture from 1 Chronicles this morning is a call to worship. And it reminds me of a cheer at a football game. Let's try that...when I say "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good..." you respond "his love endures forever." (3x)

Our youth group has a tradition of "Yay Gods!" When they are on a mission trip, they look for God moments throughout the day that they can lift up in their evening worship time. They share their Yay Gods and give thanks to the Lord for he is good....(his love endures forever!)

2020 is going into the record books as a year no one wants to remember, but we all will! This year has been a challenging year for everyone. It has been hard to find Yay Gods. We have had a global pandemic, which has threatened our economy, our health, our very way of life. We have seen raging wildfires and a hurricane season like no other with Louisiana getting slammed a record 5 times. Racial and political tensions have led to great division in our nation. Our hearts are heavy.

I could rewrite our scripture from Habakkuk this morning:

Though COVID 19 continues to spread and healthcare workers are weary,  
Though the fires and storms have destroyed homes and taken lives,

Though the racial and political tensions continue to divide a nation,

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my Savior. (Hart 1:1-2)

Notice how Habakkuk ends. He ends with thanks and praise. But he didn't start out that way. The name Habakkuk has two meanings: the first is "to wrestle." He starts out wrestling with God:

*How long, LORD, must I call for help,  
but you do not listen?  
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"  
but you do not save?  
3 Why do you make me look at injustice?  
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?  
Destruction and violence are before me;  
there is strife, and conflict abounds.  
4 Therefore the law is paralyzed,  
and justice never prevails.  
The wicked hem in the righteous,  
so that justice is perverted. (Habakkuk 1:2-4)*

In this first chapter, Habakkuk was crying out to God "why don't you DO something?" He was ranting about how the Israelites had gone stark raving mad! There was violence, injustice, divisions, and contentiousness. Hmm. Sounds familiar. He states his complaints and frustrations. He asked God "why are you silent?" Have any of you asked that question at all this year? I know I have. So, God then gives Habakkuk an answer. And guess what? He didn't like the answer. God was going to raise up the Babylonians and have them "sweep over the whole earth." Habakkuk wanted God to do something, but this is not what he had in mind. He continued to wrestle with God and to voice his complaints. In my study bible, the subtitles for these sections are "Habakkuk's complaints."

Complaining is something that we are all guilty of, some more than others. To many it is an artform. So I have some tips for you today on how to become a great complainer:

- Keep a journal – Keep a journal of every minute irritation that you experience. Try to capture at least 3-4 per day.
- Watch your language - Use lots of negative words in your thoughts and conversations:
  - Horrible
  - Bad
  - Atrocious
  - Irritating
  - Stupid
  - Idiot (that was one of my dad's favorites that I find very helpful)
- Focus your attention - focus on the problems of the past and the worries of the future. If you focus on the present, you might get distracted enjoying yourself and miss great opportunities for complaints.
- Prayer – skip over any praise or adoration and get right to the complaints and frustrations on your heart

- Health and Self-Care – Totally neglect your health and self-care – healthy people have nothing to complain about and we don't want that! We have to practice to become great complainers!

Ok, so I hope you sensed the sarcasm in this past section. I don't believe anybody needs help to become a better complainer. It is important for our mental well-being to find a healthy expression of our frustrations, our hurts, our worries, our complaints. Habakkuk took his complaints to God. And so should we. However, we need to focus on transforming our complaints to gritudes. We need help to become grateful in all circumstances. Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 to give thanks in all circumstances, but surely Paul was not talking about 2020!

Remember, Habakkuk ended with praise. This brings me to the second meaning for Habakkuk: "to embrace." He shifted from complaining to praising; from worrier to worshipper. How can we make that transformation? What does it look like to live a life with a grateful heart? It is so hard to see God in the midst of our mess. How can we be grateful for tragedy, hardship, heartache? Only with a grateful heart can we see God's hand at work. When we see it, we say thank you God. And sometimes it is not until we are through to the other side that we are able to look back and be thankful. I want to share some examples of people who live their lives with a grateful heart:

With a name like hers, gratitude might seem to come naturally to Dawn Joy of Glen Burnie, Maryland.

But it was not until she nearly drowned 20 years ago that Joy "really learned to be grateful for every day... When you have gratitude you see all the good things in your life."

She's especially grateful for all those wagging tails that keep passing through her life: the 162 "sick, injured, blind, and senior" miniature schnauzers whose lives she has already helped turn around.

"Life can be overwhelming at times," says Kai Koerber, 18. He should know. He was a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, when a gunman opened fire in 2018.

One way Koerber, a freshman at the University of California at Berkeley, copes with that experience is "to just take time to think about what you're truly grateful for. What you have." Gratitude helps "keep you grounded in reality." (And I would add that gratitude helps keep you grounded in your faith.)

Anthony Ray Hinton spent 30 years on death row for a crime he didn't commit. He was working in a locked factory at the time of the crime he was being accused of. His time in jail was spent in solitary

confinement in a five-by-seven-foot cell, allowed out only one hour a day. But Hinton quickly became a friend and counselor to other inmates and the death row guards, many of whom begged Hinton's attorney to get him out.

A unanimous Supreme Court ruling ordered his release and he was able to walk free. In an interview he is quoted saying:

*"One does not know the value of freedom until it is taken away, People run out of the rain. I run into the rain...I am so grateful for every drop. Just to feel it on my face."*

Hinton was later interviewed on 60 Minutes. The interviewer asked if he was angry at the people who put him in jail. *He said he forgave them all.*

The interviewer asked, "but they took 30 years of your life — how can you not be angry?"

Hinton responded: *"If I'm angry and unforgiving, they will have taken the rest of my life."*

A story closer to home comes from one of our mission trips to Eleuthera. If you have ever been on a mission trip, you know that more often than not, you come home feeling more blessed than you were a blessing. Our team experienced that through Brenda Lee. Brenda Lee was an older woman who had some difficulty with mobility. She had a huge hole in her roof, which was one of the projects that they were working on. One day, she greeted the team by coming out onto her porch, singing at the top of her lungs, "Even if I don't have a roof over me, I still have Jesus!"

These are all examples of people who have gone through life's difficulties and yet they still rejoice in the Lord. All of these people, Hinton, Joy, Koerber, and Brenda Lee, wrestled with God to find their way out of worry and complaining to a grateful heart.

I am grateful every day for God's blessings. I have often said if I ever stop being amazed or surprised by God, I am in trouble. Last week was just another example of this. I received an email from a friend. This friend had no idea that I was preaching today, nor did they know the topic. They just thought I would like what they had read in *Daily Ponderables*:

"To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all of our lives - the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections - that requires hard spiritual work. Still we are only truly grateful people when we say thank you to all that has brought us to the present moment. As long as we keep dividing our lives between events and people we would like to remember and those we would rather forget, we cannot claim the fullness of our beings as a gift of God to be grateful for. Let us not be afraid to look at everything that has brought us to where we are now and trust that we will soon see in it the guiding hand of a loving God."

How can we get to a place where we look at everything in our lives and be grateful? It isn't easy, but it is possible. Habakkuk went from being a worrier/complainer to a worshipper. He gave thanks to the Lord for he is good, (his love endures forever.) After he wrestled with God, he embraced God and remembered who God is and His promises. We too, can move from worriers/complainers to worshippers. We can learn from Habakkuk who teaches us to face our doubts and questions honestly, take them humbly to the Lord, wait for His Word to teach us, and worship Him no matter how we feel or what we see. Let's take another look at the list for great complainers and see how we can transform into great worshippers:

- Keep a journal – write down every joyful moment, God sighting, Yay God and gratitude. Try at least 3-4 per day.
- Watch your language - Use positive, affirming thoughts and words whenever you can:
  - Joyous
  - Awesome
  - Great
  - Amazing
  - Blessed
  - Thankful
- Focus your attention - Be focused on the present moment so you don't miss God at work
- Health and self-care - Take care of yourself physically, mentally, and spiritually. An attitude of gratitude is good for the heart and the brain. It helps reduce depression and anxiety. And it helps us grow in our faith as we regularly offer God thanks and praise.

I had another Yay God this week. Earlier this year, we had made a request in the bulletin to write letters for the Kairos prison ministry. We received a few and the children's ministry made some drawings that were taken to the Zephyrhills Correctional Institution. I received this email from Joe Lowrey, our liaison for Kairos. Again, I am grateful for God's perfect timing.

*I was in ZCI yesterday and was stopped by two inmates that had received letters/drawings. The first was overwhelmed that someone cared enough to do this and was very grateful. The second is quite a story: He had received a drawing of Golgotha and the name Matthew in the lower right corner. The inmate was in tears as he showed me a tattoo on his arm. It said Matthew and was there in memory of a son he had lost many years ago.*

*We serve an awesome God.*

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good (his love endures forever).

Many of us have been wrestling with our own questions about the current status in our world. We have become frustrated, angry, fearful, or what my grandfather called me, worry warts. I heard this week that 2020 has become a bad word. So what do we have to be grateful for in 2020? Let me share some of my Yay Gods with you:

- For my husband, Bill, who supports me, and listens to my complaints and my gratitudes
- When COVID hit, we learned a new way of staying connected through ZOOM. My Wednesday morning prayer group doubled in size! They have been such a blessing to me and I am so thankful for them
- More time, due to the shelter-in-place, to spend time with God and reflect on what was truly essential
- Lizzie my therapy dog constantly makes me smile
- A gentle breeze as I walk
- A rainbow appearing in the sky – the biggest, brightest, most beautiful rainbow was in the sky as I walked the causeway just yesterday. Thank you God!

We need to remember our joy does not come from this world. Habakkuk teaches us that empires may rise and fall, but God is on His holy throne and He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Habakkuk knew things were going to get bad. His nation would be invaded. Many would be slain or sent into exile. The land would be ruined, and the temple destroyed. Yet he will give thanks to God, trust God, and worship God no matter what. We are grateful people not because of our circumstances, or who we are, or what we have or what we have done, but because of who God is. He is our strength, our hope, our peace, our joy. We can give thanks to the Lord for he is good! His love endures forever!