

I have this note on my phone, a note that would not exist were it not for this lovely year that we are living in, 2020. I don't know when it happened, because at this rate, what is time? But it was some time this summer, and it seemed like my family went through this stretch of a couple of weeks where every single day the Covid/pandemic mood would hit one of us. Without fail, one of us would wake up and that *feeling* would just be there, that feeling of this is never going to be over, everything is awful, why is everything miserable, and my entire day is already shot because the world feels like it's burning down around us and we can't do anything about it because we're stuck inside the four walls of our house and we can only sit and watch it happen. I hope beyond hope this sounds familiar, because if it was just my family, then it makes us sound like we're crazy...which admittedly we kind of are, but that's neither here nor there.

Anyway, at some point, Kristin decided that this feeling needed a *word*, a term, a way to describe it so that we can give each other a heads up that that's where we were, rather than just letting loose all of our angst in our group chat, we figured we needed a signal, a red flag that was stood for either leave me entirely alone today or here is the reason for why I seem like a total mess. For the purposes of our current, churchy context, I'm going to adapt Kristin's term a bit, but this is why there's a note on my phone

entitled: *Heckzone Avoidance*. You heard that correctly, my sister in all of her lovely, editorial eloquence came up with *heckzone* as our word to describe the darkest moods of 2020.

As we all embraced said term in our lives, it also became apparent that steps needed to be taken to either get out of said zone or avoid it entirely, thus the note on my phone. It became a list of things that I was thankful for or at least appreciative of in the midst of 2020, things that maybe wouldn't have happened if not for this year. There have been stretches where that list worked and there have been moments where I've wanted nothing to do with that list, because, well, frankly I think we've all had those days this year where we've folded our arms and been like, "I am not going to be thankful for anything this year, because everything is awful and I'm going to pout and be my momentary, Grinchy I must keep Christmas from coming bah humbug self." So the heckzone comes and goes, and sometimes it's easy to ward off and sometimes it just sucks you in, and it was this reality that kept coming back to my brain as I tried and tried and tried to avoid thinking about which portion of the lessons kept kicking for me this week.

I told Bible study, I told my sister, I told anyone who asked me about my sermon this week that I was going to write about Isaiah, about freedom, and God being the breaker of chains, about how the fundamental revelation

of who God is in Isaiah is that God is the one who frees us, and yet...that sermon wouldn't come. No matter how hard I tried. Mostly because one line from 1 Thessalonians kept playing over and over in my head because it was annoying the daylights out of me: "Give thanks in all circumstances..." I literally wrote that out in my notes and after it put, oy... because you read that this year and it just sounds...ridiculous and impossible and frustrating and just about the last reminder you could possibly want. Give thanks in all circumstances. Uh huh, ok Paul, but have you ever lived through a global pandemic that is terrifying and annoying and hard and feels like it's gone on forever? No, so let's not talk about giving thanks in all circumstances. And yet...I kept coming back to it. It kept kicking, and finally I admitted, that kicking? It might just be the Holy Spirit, so here we are, talking about thankfulness at the end of 2020. Because here's the thing, it might not have been a pandemic, but the Thessalonians were going through *a time* too, and Paul still felt the need to call them to this spirit of thankfulness.

1 Thessalonians is actually the earliest text we have in the New Testament. It's the book, the letter really, that we have that is closest to the time when Jesus was actually alive, written less than twenty years after the crucifixion; so the reality is, these are baby, baby Christians that we're dealing with. Faith, intentional Christian community, worship of Jesus,

thoughts about the resurrection and eternal life, all of that is brand new to them. They're literally starting from scratch. They have no template for how to do this and they're doing it in the middle of an unforgiving landscape. They're living in the middle of the Roman Empire that wants nothing to do with Christianity, that has branded it as illegal, dangerous, and not to be tolerated. So, here we have a group of people who are trying to do this brand new thing, on their own, with no blueprint for how to do it, while also dealing with intense persecution that could threaten their very lives, on top of the fact that they thought Jesus would have been back by now, and their loved ones are dying and so they're also worried that the resurrection might not be for those who have already died, but only for those who are still living when Jesus returns. It's not Covid, but it's *a lot* to deal with, and yet here comes Paul with his audacity to remind them that they are to give thanks in all circumstances. Somewhere in the Thessalonian community there was an ancient version of me who heard that read out loud and immediately rolled their eyes and muttered, oy...what does this guy know about being thankful in our circumstances?

Being thankful in all circumstances feels like it flies in direct contrast to everything this year has been, and yet, isn't that the hope, the message of Christmas, of Christ's coming? That he is the light that manages to shine in

a darkness that seems impenetrable. That he is hope coming into a world that seems hopeless. That he is love coming into a world that seems unrelenting and unforgiving. Yes, thankfulness seems like the polar opposite of what we are capable of doing this year...and yet, we still live in a world that is filled with the abiding, permanent, never-ceasing presence of the Holy Spirit, and when the Holy Spirit is blowing around doing its Holy Spirit thing, somehow thankfulness seems to left in its wake. As much as I hate to admit it, because my relationship with Paul is not always a great one, he's right, no matter what, no matter the circumstances, no matter the year, no matter the anything, we are called to give thanks...and so...this morning, we build our own list, our own heckzone avoidance list, our own in all circumstances we give thanks list as a family of God, as a Trinity family. I'll start us out and then we're going to take a second and have some space for all of you to add your own additions.

Thank you God that...We're breathing. That we're alive. That we are filled with your very breath reminding us with each inhale and exhale that within us lies the spark of the divine.

Thank you God that...you call us beloved. You call us and claim us as your own, each and every day. With all of our faults and cracks, you daily remind us that we are yours.

Thank you God that...we have each other. That even across phone screens and internet connections we are the body of Christ, that you remind us that we are more than a building, we are more than a favorite pew assignment, we are your body in the world, with and for each other, drawing together in love and in prayer.

Thank you God that...we have Facebook. That somehow, some way you continue to find ways to help us see community, to redefine community. That we can laugh and share the peace and be who we are together. That we can expand our community across state lines to welcome all.

Thank you God that...we can be creative. That even in the midst of holidays that will feel different, our families will be drawn together in new and profound ways in order to make the most of every moment we have together even when we are apart.

Thank you God that...the earth keeps spinning. That we can look out our windows and marvel in the wonder of creation, that the wind is your Holy Spirit, that rain is a reminder of our baptism, that falling leaves are a reminder of death and resurrection, and that green grass is a reminder of new beginnings in all things.

Thank you God that...we can marvel in the small things. A good book savored in time at home, fresh cups of coffee shared on Zoom and with

loved ones by our side, for slippers and heated blankets, for Christmas lights and ornaments, for puppy kisses and kitten snuggles, for internet memes and gifs that make us laugh, for bingeworthy tv and new recipes tried.

Thank you God that...we can breathe fresh air. For time spent on balconies and back porches, on trails and in parks.

Thank you God that...we have masks. For people who have found new fonts of creativity to provide simple pieces of life-giving cloth.

Thank you God that...you offer us grace and forgiveness, hope and mercy, even when we think we don't deserve it, even when we aren't even sure how to receive it.

People of God...it's your turn...what fills your list? Thank you God that... *(space for Facebook comments)*

Give thanks in all circumstances indeed.

Thank you God that...you love us. That we love each other. That you are the light shining in the darkness. That your Son is coming into the world. That you show us that vulnerability and love have a place in the world. That you call us to share life and love with one another. That you create us one for another. That you call us family. That you give us one another as a family. That you call us church. That you call us out to serve. That you give us life. In all circumstances we say...thank you. **AMEN!!!**