

What was I thinking?

November 21, 2021



Giving thanks

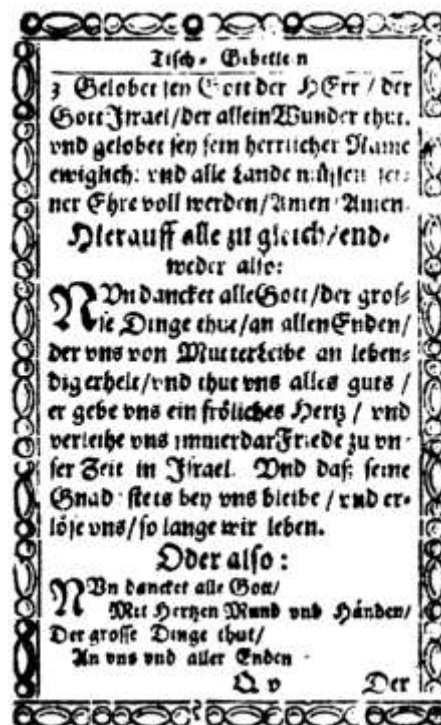
Last week I wrote about this being an interesting time in the church year, at least if we follow the liturgical church year and some kind of lectionary, which we do. Planning music is challenging for me during this time, not because it's hard to find things, but there can be too many choices and I'm wondering what to sing when. You usually hear me grumbling about singing Christmas carols too soon when it's still Advent. I love Christmas and Christmas music, but I also find truly observing the season of Advent to be meaningful. We can learn the discipline of waiting and preparing. If we jump to Christmas too soon, by the time Christmas Eve and Christmas Day get here, it's anticlimactic.

This Sunday, we'll hear the words of the prophet Isaiah, and they'll sound very familiar: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." If a certain chorus of Handel's *Messiah* is now going through your head, you are not alone. Those words make us think of Advent or even Christmas.

As I wrote last week, though we don't have a Thanksgiving service in our church, I do like to acknowledge the holiday in some musical way. It's also Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday on the liturgical calendar, and for us it happens to be Stewardship Commitment Sunday, when we present what we plan to give to the church in the year to come. When we hear "Thanksgiving," most of us think of a uniquely American holiday with roots in a 1621 harvest celebration feast held by English colonists we call often call Pilgrims along with some Native Americans. The real history is a little more complicated. It's also good to keep in mind that celebrations giving thanks for the

gathered harvest is not new and unique to our country. Giving thanks for what we have shouldn't be limited to a day in November when we eat turkey and watch football.

Martin Rinkart was born in Eilenburg, Saxony, in 1586. As a child, he was a scholar and chorister at St. Thomas' School in Leipzig. He became a theological student and earned a Master of Arts degree in 1616. He became master of a school and cantor of St. Nicholas Church in Eisleben, and soon after that became pastor of St. Anne's Church in Neustadt of Eilenburg. Eventually he became archdeacon of Eilenburg, where he stayed for thirty-two years. Most of that time coincided with the Thirty Years' War and the horrors it brought. Eilenburg was a walled city and people came from miles around seeking refuge. Overcrowding led to famine and pestilence (disease/plague). In 1637, the superintendent left, and two other clergy died. Rinkart was left alone to minister to the city. At times he had to perform forty to fifty funerals a day. His own wife died and he became sick himself, but recovered. He worked hard to spare the city from excessive taxes during that difficult time. But his actions brought little gratitude from the authorities in the city. He was even harassed by them. He died, exhausted, on December 8, 1649. Rinkart was a musician, and among other things, he composed a number of hymns. One of them was a prayer to be said (or maybe sung) at meals. We know it as the first two stanzas of *Now Thank We All Our God*. It's hard to imagine someone who lived in such a troubled time expressing such gratitude.



The words are not entirely of his own creation. They come from the Apocrypha, in Sirach 50:22-24: “And now bless the God of all, who everywhere works great wonders, who fosters our growth from birth, and deals with us according to his mercy. May he give us gladness of heart, and may there be peace in our days in Israel, as in the days of old. May he entrust to us his mercy, and may he deliver us in our days!” Peace in our days. We could use some of that now.

Sunday, we’ll hear Isaiah’s words that a child will be born, a son will be given, and we will get around to that more in Advent and Christmas. But Isaiah also said, “You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.” The harvest time is a time to rejoice. That’s thanksgiving. In Proverbs 3:9 we read, “Honor the Lord with your wealth, with firstfruits of all your produce.” That’s stewardship. We give thanks for what we’ve managed to “harvest” and give a portion to God. Along with that, Isaiah tells us those who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. A son will be born who will become Prince of Peace. He will reign not as a tyrant king, but one who will establish justice and righteousness.

In our hard times, we might have reason to doubt that. We might find it hard to feel thankful right now. But if we follow the example of Martin Rinkart, we may be able to find it in our hearts to give thanks.

As I tried to resist going “full-on Thanksgiving” with music for this coming Sunday, I gave up the resistance. Another of my favorite hymns is *Come, Ye Thankful People, Come*. “But we’re not doing Thanksgiving,” I argued with myself. “It’s Christ the King Sunday. What about Isaiah?” The more I looked at the text of the hymn, and the more times I read Isaiah, the more parallels I found:

Isaiah: “For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.”

Hymn: “Give the angels charge at last in the fire the tares to cast.”

Isaiah: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us.”

Hymn: “Even so, Lord, quickly come to thy final harvest home; gather thou thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin.”

Isaiah: “But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the

latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.”

Hymn: “There forever purified, in thy presence to abide:
come, will all thine angels, come, raise the glorious harvest home.”

Giving thanks, practicing stewardship, it’s all in there. People walking in darkness? It feels like we’re still there, but we know a great light is coming. Advent literally means “coming,” and it will be here soon. For now, let’s consider our harvest and give thanks.

To the singing of the harvest-song goes the life of a year, or of all the years – the summer that is gone, the winter that is coming; the ones who have sown but are not here to reap; the ones who will sow when the reapers that are have been forgotten; the Good Being who makes the sun shine and the corn ripen. There may be the breath of a sigh in that song, but there is also in it a whole storm of rapture.

Gladness must come to its own some time; for the sorrows, there are all the times. To the harvest-field go we, then, for life as it ought to be. The sickle is fate, the hand that holds it is ours, for once we will be the conqueror. Cut we down a sorrow here and a pain there, bind them, and make them our slaves.
(Kenneth McLoud, *The Road to the Isles*)

God be with you till we meet again.

John