

Jeff's Jottings

We gather together

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*We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing;
He chastens and hastens His will to make known.
The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing.
Sing praises to his Name; He forgets not his own.*

That's the first stanza of a traditional hymn we often sing at Thanksgiving: No. 559 in the blue Presbyterian Hymnal, No. 336 in Glory to God.

It's an old Dutch hymn, written in the late 1500s. My forebears, the Dutch people, had been suffering deeply at the time under the thumb of King Philip II of Spain. There was a severe food shortage; terror in the streets. The Spanish king, a Catholic, had forbidden the Dutch Reformed Protestants to hold worship services. They literally could not gather together.

What do you do in times like that? How do you think about God, and about yourself, and not only in desperate times, but maybe in our day as well?

I'd like to think my Dutch forebears found their answer in the Bible ... in texts we sometimes take for granted but are there, clear as day. In the midst of their trouble; in the midst of a threat not simply to their faith but their very lives, I'd like to think they remembered the stories of the children of Israel, and how they had found their comfort and security not in the escape from Egypt nor in winning the battle of Jericho nor even in building the temple, but only at last in the dispersing of the nation and the losing of her wars and in the ashes of her temple.

I'd like to think they remembered Job, shorn of it all, without anything to lean on, affirming God's presence and comfort. I'd like to think they remembered the heartfelt words of the Psalms. I'd like to think they remembered the

disciples of Jesus, who never really understood Jesus until after they didn't have Jesus.

I don't want to over-praise my Dutch forebears. The hymn's second verse, to my ear, sounds suspiciously like signing God up for our fight, and not the other way around. Ironically, that's in fact how this Dutch national hymn became an American thanksgiving hymn, when during World War II, "the wicked oppressing" were understood to be Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, and we, like those late 16th century Dutch, saw God on our side.

But amidst its theological flaws, this hymn my forebears gave us can still remind us of something too often lost in this chaotic, post-modern world of ours: that finally, we can love, and we can persevere, no matter the circumstances, simply because we know beyond any doubt, that God first loved us, and loves us still.

I wish all of you a blessed Thanksgiving week. I am grateful for all of you, and for the faithfulness and clear witness of faith you bring to your communities. Happy Thanksgiving.