

October 15, 2017
Worship in Practice: The Gift of Giving (Painting)
Genesis 14:1-20, Deuteronomy 26:1-11

I had heard of vertigo. A person feels a little bit dizzy, kind of like getting up from sitting down too fast and you feel a bit light headed, right? Then in May 11 and again on September 3 I had my first ever “episodes” of vertigo. It is nothing like feeling a bit light-headed. The whole world is spinning around you and just will not stop. You feel nauseous and can’t stop vomiting because everything is moving in circles, whether your eyes are open or closed. You seriously wonder if it will ever stop, because it goes on and on. You really, seriously, begin to wonder if you will ever be able to sit up again, eat again, walk again, get out of the house again, drive again, work again, smile again, laugh again ...

You wonder if this is what life is going to be like for whatever days, months, or years you have left. And you wonder how you and your family could possibly cope.

When I felt like that, I prayed. A lot. After all, besides running to the bathroom, I couldn’t do a lot else.

And when you feel like that, and you’re praying, you reflect on what is most important in life. What was incredibly clear to me in the midst of this continuous swirl of – everything – was may the rock solid foundational reality of Jesus, my Saviour and Lord, of my Father, my God and my King, and of the Spirit, God’s personal presence. In the very, very real spinning reality in which I found myself, as I thought about God, as I prayed to Jesus, as I reached out for the Spirit, it was like, in the midst of all the movement and chaos, there was something immovable. Something absolutely solid. And it was God.

In Psalm 18, we read, *“I love you, Lord; you are my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my savior; my God is my rock, in whom I find protection. He is my shield, the power that saves me, and my place of safety.”* The old hymn goes, *“On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is shifting sand ...”* Those were the images and the refrains that went through my head.

And, despite the uncertainty, despite the stress, despite the worry, I found tremendous comfort knowing that my life, my future – the next moment of this day – is in His hands. He will get me through it. Whatever “it” is.

There are, of course, many parts to my relationship with God. At the “big” level I know that, in God – Father, Son, and Spirit – I am loved. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, He has redeemed me from my sin. I can experience His forgiveness and mercy; I can begin again. I know I am created with a purpose: for a relationship with God and with other people. I know I have a mission: to help His Kingdom come by living, loving, and sharing His love with others. I have hope for the future: my life and my eternity is in His hands. That is all good news.

But when you are feeling like your world is falling apart, when everything is in chaos, what you really want to know is that God is your rock, your fortress, your Saviour, and your shield right now, right in the midst of all the swirling mess of life.

The “up” side of those vertigo episodes was rediscovering God’s presence and power in the midst of everything else.

As I continue to work through the process of medical appointments, tests, not knowing, and waiting – and dealing with the headaches and the strong probability of more attacks – having that unshakeable powerful presence of God is the most important thing in my life.

Next most important is my family. After my prayers reflecting on God’s presence, grace, and power, I found myself praying for my family. And my church family.

What didn’t I pray about. I didn’t pray about my bank account. I didn’t pray about what kind of car I drove. I didn’t even pray about the kitchen renovation that needed to be done. Those things were WAY down my list of priorities.

Taking stock of life

We all have times when life gets chaotic. When it feels like the whole world is swirling around us. It may not be vertigo. It may be another health problem. Or it may be a family problem. Or a problem at work. Or a death. Or financial stress. Or even reading/watching too much news.

When it feels like all hell breaks loose in your life, where do you turn?

I hope you turn to God. I hope you know Him as your foundation, your rock, your strength, your comforter, and your helper through the tough times.

“Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God’s presence. When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God” (Ephesians 3:12-19).

And I hope you turn to your family: your family family. And your church family. You do not need to go through any of this alone.

And when you spend time with, invest in, and care for the people around you, you discover a new purpose and strength in life, as well.

Valuing what matters most

When you go through those chaotic times and God gets you through the other side, what do you do?

Way back in the days of Abraham, Abraham's nephew, Lot, was captured by a nasty warrior king, Kedorlaomer. Lot, his wife, his children, and everything he owned was carried off. What happens when your family is being hauled off to a life of slavery and abuse? Abraham gathered his family and gave chase. In an unlikely battle, they recovered Lot with his possessions and all the women and other captives.

On the way home, they meet Melchizedek, the king of Salem (Jerusalem), who was also a priest of God Most High. Melchizedek blessed Abraham: *"Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who has defeated your enemies for you"* (Genesis 14:19-20). It is a blessing on Abraham for the future, and a reminder to Abraham of God's blessing already in the past and present.

How did Abraham respond to God's blessing? *"Then Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of all the goods he had recovered"* (Genesis 14:20).

Melchizedek didn't need the money. God didn't need the money. The principle is that Abraham wanted to express his gratitude to God by giving God the first part of His possessions.

When the Israelites were miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt, Moses taught them to be thankful, saying, *"He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. And now, O Lord, I have brought you the first portion of the harvest you have given me from the ground.' Then place the produce before the Lord your God, and bow to the ground in worship before him"* (Deuteronomy 26:9-10).

The Biblical principle of tithing arises from a genuine relationship with God. As we reflect on how much God has done for us in the past and is doing for us, right now, we WANT to express our gratitude to Him.

Giving a tithe – the first part of our income – is one way to do that. Tithing is not a tax. It's not "the-church-wanting-my-money." It's not even about providing financial support for the ministries of the church (although that happens through our tithes). Tithing is an essential part of our worship of God. Tithing is our grateful response to God's love, care, provision, and salvation. Tithing is a tangible way we show our love for God.

Tithing is also a practical way we put our faith into practice. Money is the hardest thing to give away for many of us. It's just tough. Tithing challenges us to deal with that deeply embedded desire "to hold on" and "be safe." Do you control your pocketbook or does your pocketbook control you? Can you give to God?

Tithing encourages us actually to step out in faith. By giving God the first 10% we are trusting God to help us make it through on the other 90% (90% is still pretty good). Do you really trust God to take care of you?

"Afterward," says Moses, "you may go and celebrate because of all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household" (26:11). When we break the vice-grip our money has on us and really trust God, we can celebrate. Sometimes we think following Jesus is all serious, somber stuff – it's not. We are called to rejoice and celebrate in thanksgiving and in worship. How can we celebrate the gift of giving?

Note the second half of 26:11: *"Remember to include the Levites and the foreigners living among you in the celebration."* The Levites, the priests, were one of the 12 tribes, but they did not receive property when the Israelites came into the Promised Land. As a result, they needed the financial support of the other tribes. This was the economic order God set up. "Foreigners" were the existing peoples in Canaan, and refugees and migrants from other nations; the Israelites were to provide financial help for them, too. Unlike surrounding pagan nations, the people of God were to care for all people, not just people like them. As we thank God for our blessings, who can we bless? With whom can we share our blessings who are not like us?

Can I worship God by giving to His Kingdom? If so, great. If not, why not? For some of us, worship is all well and good until we are challenged to give money. Why? We can make all sorts of excuses and explain all sorts of things away ... but at the end of the day, what does this say about how thankful we really are? How strong our faith is? What does this say about our worship of – and trust in – God?

Can I "put my money where my mouth is"?

I shouldn't be surprised, but I am always amazed how, when life seems to coming apart at the seams and the whole world is (literally) spinning out of control, God is the rock solid centre of my existence. He is simply THE immoveable, stable, foundation that nothing and no one can knock out of place. It's one of those truths I have always known ***intellectually and theologically***; it is also the great ***practical*** truth I experience in my life as well. God is simply the unbreakable root that goes far deeper than any problem. He is the width, length, height, and depth of my whole existence.

I want to worship Him. With my lips. With my heart. With my mind. With my art. And with my pocketbook. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive. I want to give thanks with a grateful heart. I want to give thanks with more than just nice words. God is too wonderful not to want to give Him my everything ...