



Historians tell us of a war which ravaged Europe roughly between the years 1618 and 1648. It's difficult to determine an exact starting date of the conflict, but we can trace its roots to unrest in what is today the Czech Republic (then called "Bohemia") and more specifically to the city of Prague, where Bohemian Protestants took issue with the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, who was Roman Catholic.

Conflict broke out, and alliances were soon in the making. Appeals were made by the Bohemians to other Protestant states for help....and very soon the THIRTY YEARS WAR was underway. It not only involved Bohemia and Germany, but also Sweden, Denmark, England, Spain, and the Netherlands.

A lot could be said about the war, but what makes it historic are several factors. First of all, the length of the conflict—30 years. But it is also remembered by historians for the amount of violence, savagery, and destruction perpetrated upon the citizens of Central and Northern Europe. The horrors of this war were many. On May 10, 1631, the City of Magdeburg, a Lutheran stronghold, was overrun by Imperial troops. 25,000 citizens were slaughtered and the city burned to the ground. Woodcuts depict thousands of dead bodies hanging in trees, which were then cut down and thrown into the Elbe River. Germany, make no mistake, was ground zero for the conflict. To quote one historian: "There were few areas of the country which were not ravaged and plundered....wolves roamed over what had once been cultivated fields....people were reduced to savagery and even cannibalism in an effort to stay alive. Education ceased, superstition increased, and even the smallest act of civility became a thing of the past." It is no small wonder that many thought that the end of the world was at hand.

In the middle of this scene of conflict and suffering is set a THANKSGIVING STORY involving a man by the name of Martin Rinkart. The son of a cooper, he was born April 23, 1586 in the town of Eilenburg, Saxony. He was ordained a Lutheran pastor in 1612, and served St. Anne's Church in Eisleben until 1617 when he was invited to become Archdeacon of Eilenburg, his home town. There he would remain for 32 years, most of those years amidst the horrors of the THIRTY YEARS WAR. Eilenburg was a fortified city, surrounded by a big high wall, and so naturally people streamed

there from miles around for refuge. There was terrible overcrowding, and when the town came under siege, the food supply was shut off, resulting in famine. With poor sanitation and thousands of diseased rats running about, it's understandable that there was an outbreak of deadly plague.

Pastor Rinkart, with three other pastors, labored furiously to minister to the sick and dying. In 1637, the two other pastors died, leaving Pastor Rinkart to alone minister to the throngs crammed inside those city walls. On the average day, he performed burial services for 40 to 50 people. In the middle of all this, both his wife and children succumbed to the plague, and he himself contracted the disease, somehow managing to recover.

It was in the midst of these horrific circumstances, with unparalleled death and destruction, that Pastor Martin Rinkart sat down, and with pen in hand, began to write the words of what would become one of the world's most beloved hymns:

*“Now thank we all our God, With hearts and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, In whom his world rejoices.
Who from our mother's arms, Has blessed us on our way,
With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today.” (LSB 895, stz. 1)*

The obvious question is—how was it possible for Pastor Rinkart to write such words given the circumstances he was in? The answer is relatively simple, and leaps from the pages of Sacred Scripture. Martin Rinkart's words are a testimony to a JOY which comes, not from outward circumstances, but from the inside. His words bear testimony to the same spirit which prompted the apostles to sing songs of praise to God, while in jail, and in the middle of the darkest night. His words bear testimony to this remarkable Christian faith of ours, which moved St. Paul to write some equally remarkable words: “Give thanks...in all circumstances.” (I Thessalonians 5: 18)

But how? How can I give thanks in all circumstances? Why WOULD you give thanks in ALL circumstances? We find the answer in the words of the Psalmist: “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, and his mercies endure forever.” (Psalm 118:1) The word “mercy” is found over 400 times in the Old Testament alone, a word which speaks to us of a God who is faithful to HIS covenant, even when we have been unfaithful; of a God who bestows exceedingly good gifts, in particular, the gift of forgiveness of sin; a word which contains within itself the concepts of faithfulness and compassion and acting in our best interest even when we don't deserve it. The word speaks of a love and faithfulness which endures even when outward circumstances would suggest otherwise.

How could Pastor Martin Rinkart possibly write “Now Thank We All Our God” in the middle of the death and destruction of the Thirty Years War? Quite simply: He believed with all his heart that, even when everything else had fallen away, we as

Christians can still give thanks for Christ, our Savior, and for the best and most precious gifts of all: Forgiveness of sin, life and salvation through him. The mercy of God, through Jesus Christ his Son, remains steadfast and unchangeable in the midst of changeable, conflicted, and threatening circumstances. Were everything else to fall away, there is still Jesus, “for whom and through whom we give thanks.” (Colossians 3: 17)

For some of you, no doubt, this has been a terrific year, an exceptional year. For others, the year which quickly draws to a close has been a lean year indeed, fraught with difficulty. But the bottom line is—if you have Christ in your heart, no matter what your outward circumstances, you have reason to give thanks. Let us pray God to open our eyes, for no year is devoid of the mercies of God. Above it all and beneath it all lies a promise of God which supersedes life’s ups and downs, and it is this: “All things work for the good of him who loves God.” (Romans 8: 28) Since we know in our hearts that this is true, we can sing, no matter what our circumstances:

*“All praise and thanks to God, The Father now be given,
The Son and Him who reigns, With Them in highest heaven,
The one eternal God, Whom earth and heav’n adore;
For thus it was, is now, And shall be ever more.” (LSB 895, stz. 3)*

Thanksgiving Blessings to you and yours from the Eastern District Staff