

*You crown the year with your goodness, and your paths overflow with plenty.* - Psalm 65:11

Celebrating Thanksgiving during a pandemic? Safety conflicts with longing, family numbers just will not fit into emergency measures restrictions, it takes more time and effort to sanitize the house than to prepare the celebration meal. We feel that tension around our church Thanksgiving meal too—Holy Communion. But we will all try, with prudence, and patience, and persistence in problem solving, right? Those three “pandemic virtues” are indeed gifts of God’s grace for this year’s Thanksgiving celebration.

Luther D. Reed, the primary scholar for Lutheran worship two generations ago, pointed out the main difference between the Lutheran Festival of Harvest and the ancient Rogation Days: the old emphasis on penitential litanies and prayers imploring God’s blessings on the earth were replaced in the Reformation by songs of thanksgiving for the bountifulness of God’s blessings and warnings against greed and covetousness. The words of Psalm 65:11 (above) were set at the beginning of the thanksgiving service (the Introit). This influence has grown through the subsequent revisions into a full, congregational recitation on Thanksgiving Sunday. The notes of confident gratitude for the many ways God provides for creation and through creation for ever creature help us overcome the anxieties and troubles the cloud our Thanksgivings at home and church this year. Just as Psalm 65 helps us prepare for Holy Communion this Sunday, so it can help us to receive our Thanksgiving dinner too. Whether we are fewer than usual or only one gathered at the table, may Psalm 65 be the first words of the meal, and the psalm prayer part of our table grace:

*Lord God, joy marks your presence; beauty, abundance and peace are the tokens of your work in all creation. Work also in our lives, that by these signs we may see the splendour of your love and may praise you through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.*

Two generations later, the concerns are less with history and more with the future. The post-war generation worried about nuclear winter; today’s generation worries about environmental apocalypse. What Philip Pfatteicher and Carlos Messerli wrote in 1979 has become even more important today:

“The world that God created is the means of communion between [God’s self] and humanity. Because of sin, however, the creation is no longer of itself capable of sustaining that communion. The invocation of the Spirit in the Thanksgiving acknowledges that it is by the power of God’s promise that [elements of creation] can be the sign of the sacrament[s].”

*(Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship, p. 176f, adapted.)*

What they wrote about baptism can be said about the Sacrament of Holy Communion too. In other words, because of sin in ourselves and sin in the world, communion with God can not be sustained without baptism and eucharist. That means there are many connections between washing our face at the end of the day and washing our soul at the beginning of our communion with God, between sharing the meal in which Jesus is the host and sharing the meals in which we invite him as our guest. One of our table graces expresses those connections so well:

*Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed. By your hands we all are fed; thank you Lord for daily bread. Amen*

Yes, by the help of the Holy Spirit we can indeed celebrate Thanksgiving in this pandemic!