

**A Time for Thanksgiving Series: *For Land and Country***  
**Sermon on Psalm 33 (11/14 & 11/15/15)**  
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Some days are an exercise in contrasts, aren't they? On Friday afternoon, my fiancé, Derrick, and I had our engagement photos taken in downtown Bismarck. It was an hour of smiles and sweetness and laughter.

Then, when we were done with our fun photo shoot, we went out to eat at a restaurant where the large, flat-screen TV near us was displaying aftermath scenes of the terrorist attacks in Paris, France. And, of course, since the TV was set on one of our 24-hour cable news stations, the only news we saw in the hour we were there was news about the attacks.

As we watched and talked some about news of the Paris attacks, our server commented on how Indonesia had been on fire for months.

His comment came as a way of pointing out that, while our 24-hour news cycle was currently focused on terrorism in France, a small country thousands of miles away from there had been suffering mightily, in an ongoing way, for a significant period of time...but our news cycle hadn't deemed that worthy enough for its time and attention.

Besides that, there were also terrorist attacks late this week in Beirut, Lebanon, and in Baghdad, Iraq. But news seemed solely focused on Paris...and who knows for what reasons. //

Sometimes, when we want to revel in joy – or, when we want to just *be*, without hearing another story about a terrorist attack, a random shooting, a natural disaster, or a tragic accident – sometimes, when we want to simply *be*, the world doesn't let us.

So we become sad...reflective. We pray. We are captivated by the news stories. We get angry at the perpetrators of violence and we swell with grateful emotion when we hear about those who offer help in the aftermath.

And then, all too often, and much too quickly, in the aftermath of violence or tragedy, we feel the need to form an opinion about what *should* happen or what should *be* happening in response. It's like it's in our DNA as human beings to do this.

Something bad happens, we perhaps take a moment to pause and reflect...and then we begin postulating on what our leaders should do next.

Perhaps we can't help it when we do this. And perhaps it's ultimately harmless. So

few of us are in a position to *actually* decide what kind of response is best and appropriate in the aftermath of things like terrorist attacks. For that reason, maybe it's harmless when we formulate and share our thoughts on who should do what to whom and when it should happen.

But what if we trained ourselves to hold off on opinions for a bit? What if we allowed ourselves to grieve and to really pray? One of the great blessings and curses of being human is that we do not know everything and we do not have the ability to fully discern what is the best course of action in any given circumstance.

We can do our best...but only *God* is almighty and all-knowing. Only God is able to see into each of our hearts and to filter through all of everything that happens in this world.

That we humans cannot do this is a *curse* because we want to have a sense of control over our lives. Things like terrorist attacks, mass shootings, tragic accidents, and natural disasters insert randomness and fear into our hearts and minds. Most of us don't handle randomness and fear all too well. So we react with knee-jerk opinions and actions because they help us regain a sense of control.

It's a curse that we don't know everything and that we can't always do what we'd like to do in the aftermath of violence and tragedy. It's a curse because so often we do want and need control. But, as frustrating as it can be that we lack control, it's also a blessing. Or, rather, it *can be* a blessing.

Being limited as humans can inspire us to ask for help when we need it. It can inspire us to be patient when our world spins out of control.

Perhaps most importantly, understanding our own limits as human beings can remind us that we...are...*not*...God. And I suspect that may be what is at the heart of Psalm 33. Really, understanding that we are not God is at the heart of *all* the psalms – and at the heart of the entire Bible. But, today, we at McCabe are looking specifically to Psalm 33.

Listen again to portions of this psalm. Hear in these words an acknowledgment of God's power over ours...and hear in them a sincere desire to look for God's guidance and strength in all things:

“The Lord is truthful; he can be trusted. He loves justice and fairness, and he is kind to everyone everywhere on earth. The Lord made the heavens and everything in them by his word... The Lord blesses each nation that worships only him ... The Lord looks at the world from his throne in heaven, and he watches us all.

“The Lord gave us each a mind, and nothing we do can be hidden from him. Mighty

armies alone cannot win wars for a king; great strength by itself cannot keep a soldier safe.

“In war the strength of a horse cannot be trusted to take you to safety. But the Lord watches over all who honor him and trust his kindness... We depend on you, Lord, to help and protect us. You make our hearts glad because we trust you, the only God. Be kind and bless us! We depend on you.”

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Months ago, when the plan fell into place for this November “A Time for Thanksgiving” sermon and worship series, I wanted to make sure one of the weekends surrounding Veterans Day had a focus on giving thanks “for land and country.” Psalm 33 seemed a fitting Scripture reading to help inform that theme.

Not only does Psalm 33 acknowledge God as our Creator – as the One who made this beautiful land we call “home” – but Psalm 33 also includes words about how the “Lord blesses each nation that worships only him.”

The context of this psalm is the nation of Israel. Israel has an understanding of themselves as God's “chosen” people...as the nation who first *chose* to follow our God as their God.

When the psalmist writes that the “Lord blesses each nation that worships only him,” *Israel* is implied. As a people who *chose* – and who continue to choose – to follow this God, Israel is constantly challenged to worship God and God alone.

But the psalmist also means to suggest it's wise for all *other* nations to worship God alone. Thousands of years after the writing of Psalm 33, this means our own nation as well. Which is tricky to think and talk about, isn't it? Too easily we all allow our own political preferences to cloud our sense of what it means to be a nation that worships God alone.

We're human. We are limited. We each have our particular way of seeing things based on our experiences...and it's so easy to confuse our own perspective with *God's* perspective. Yet none of us is The One who sits on a heavenly throne watching everything. So the grace and the challenge of Psalm 33 is that we are *not God*.

It's *God's* job to be God. It's *our* job turn our hearts and minds *toward* God in worship. In *all* circumstances. And *gratitude* is one very good way to do just this: because gratitude helps to shape our perspective. It helps us search for where God is bringing good even in the midst of heartache. Even in the midst of terrorism.

So, this week, we here at McCabe give thanks to God for our land and for our

country.

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As I thought through how best to communicate the message of “thanksgiving for land and country” – especially in light of Veterans Day – I wanted to make sure any words of thanksgiving for land and country were not exclusively my own. So I sought the words of others.

Early this week, I posted on Facebook asking for thoughts regarding what folks are thankful for when it comes to our land and country.

Some expressed gratitude for the diverse beauty of our national landscape. We certainly do love our wide-open North Dakota skies, but folks everywhere in our country appreciate the unique beauty of their particular spot on the map.

Others mentioned how thankful they are for the diverse *people* in these United States and for the ways in which citizens have stood up for – and continue to stand up for – the rights of those who are struggling. My mother specifically lifted up voting rights for women and folks in non-white, ethnic minority groups.

And, of course, several folks were clear they are thankful for our men and women in the military – those who put their lives on the line to help keep us safe and to defend our democracy.

In fact, with Veterans Day in mind, late last weekend, I emailed my favorite veteran – my father – and asked him if he'd be willing to share some thoughts on what his time in the military meant to him...and how it continues to affect his life and perspective today. He was happy to oblige my request – and comfortable with me sharing his response. So, for my father, for his service, and for his sharing, I, too, am thankful. //

My parents' relationship with each other began in the early 1970's, in the shadow of the Vietnam War, very soon after they each graduated from college. Growing up, I recall hearing my mom talk about how scary it was for all of them in my parents' generation during that time.

I know the pace of my parents' relationship was affected by my dad's draft number and by their heightened awareness of the high likelihood that his number would, in fact, be called. And it was. After my dad's draft number came up, he enlisted in the Air Force and spent the bulk of his military service as an officer on an Air Force base in the St. Louis area.

My dad has a clear sense that there was nothing “heroic” about his service during the Vietnam War...a clear sense that there are countless others – some even sitting in this worship space today – who sacrificed in more poignant, more painful ways than he ever did.

Because my dad responded so eloquently when I asked him to share some of this thoughts with me, I'm going to read portions of what he wrote. He said: "The American democracy can be – and is – frequently threatened both from within and from forces outside the country, [so] those who choose to defend the democracy through military service and other forms of public service are to be applauded for their commitment."

He also shared with me that, since his particular service in the Air Force prevented him from going to Vietnam, he did experience a level of "survivor's guilt." About this, my dad said, "I suspect this feeling [of guilt] was made more acute when I recuperated from minor nose surgery on a military hospital ward populated primarily by young men who had been seriously injured in combat.

"My minor discomfort was embarrassing compared to the catastrophic injuries many of them sustained in Vietnam. It was only several years after I left the service that I discussed my 'survivor's guilt' with a veteran who had served as a helicopter gunner in Vietnam, one of the most dangerous of all combat roles. He told me that I should 'get over it' and that everyone who served in the military during the war played their own unique role..."

"It gave me a measure of relief to hear this message of reassurance from someone whose service was so much more heroic than mine."

In his email response to me this past week, my dad also mentioned how his service in the military heightened his sense that the political and military leaders who consider putting service members in harm's way ought to take that responsibility with utmost solemnity.

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The particular role my father played during the Vietnam War has shaped him as a human being. As his daughter, and as one who grew-up hearing stories from that period in our nation's history, my dad's military service has also shaped *me* and my own sense of duty, service, and commitment.

I add my own gratitude to the "thank you"s that have been offered this past week to our veterans. I love this country and I am thankful to those who choose to protect it. I also hope and pray that, after you have served to protect us, we – as a nation and as individuals – will do everything we can to respect and care for you.

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Again, the psalmist wrote: "The Lord is truthful; he can be trusted. He loves justice and fairness, and he is kind to everyone everywhere on earth. The Lord made the heavens and everything in them by his word... The Lord blesses each nation that worships only him ... The Lord looks at the world from his throne in heaven, and he watches us all.

“We depend on you, Lord, to help and protect us. You make our hearts glad because we trust you, the only God. Be kind and bless us! We depend on you.”

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This day and always, may we be ever grateful for our land and for this country we call home. And, as people of faith within this nation, may we seek to be among those who turn our hearts and minds to God in worship – every moment of every day...in all we do. Let us pray.

*Almighty God, Heavenly Father, may our gratitude grow to overflowing. When we see blue skies...when we see the sun shining...when the landscape reminds us of your majesty...turn us toward you, our blessed Creator. Keep us mindful that you reign over all and that only you are all-powerful and know all things. Mold our hearts and minds to worship you always. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*