



November 21, 2022

THANKSGIVING

I recall that during one of the uncomfortable nights of my first bout of insomnia, a song covered by the Bobby Fuller Four, "I Fought the Law," played repeatedly in my eighth-grade brain. I didn't like the song and had little interest in fighting the law, but my Top-40 listening habits somehow catapulted that song into an Excedrin-headache pounding. Several decades and attacks of insomnia later, I contemplated this Thanksgiving, family ties, and "Faith Matters." I experienced only minor sleeplessness one night, and in wakeful moments I heard in my head the first verse of a popular hymn, "Now Thank We All Our God":

*Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom His world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms, has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.*

What an improvement over "I Fought the Law"! I wouldn't have been confident about singing the hymn, but I was less critical as long as the music stayed in my mind. The message was reassuring, and I would have continued if I'd remembered the rest:

*Oh may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed,
And guard us through all ills in this world and the next.*

*All praise and thanks to God, who reigns in highest heaven,
To Father and to Son and Spirit now be given:
The one eternal God, whom heaven and earth adore,
The God who was, and is, now and forevermore.*

Having slept reasonably well, I was curious about the hymn and looked it up the next day. I found that "Now Thank We All Our God"

probably dates back to 1637, with lyrics by Martin Rinkart, who was a German poet, Lutheran minister, theologian, and musician from Eilenburg. The melody is attributed to Johann Cruger, 1647, and Catherine Winkworth offered an English translation in 1858.

Perhaps few of us would be thankful for a life like that of Martin Rinkart. The major part of his career in Eilenburg coincided almost exactly with the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), which embroiled much of Europe and led to millions of casualties, including at least one-fifth of the German population (Temple). A walled city, Eilenburg was overrun not only with soldiers but also refugees. Food was scarce, and then plague struck in 1637. One clergyman left Eilenburg, and two others died, so Rinkart was the only one left to officiate sometimes as many as 50 funerals in a single day (Mountenay). Rinkart's own first wife was among the dead in 1637. Somehow Rinkart himself was apparently not infected, but demands on his resources meant that he found it difficult to feed his own family. (Nevertheless, the hymn might have originated as a table prayer of thanks.) In addition to all of Rinkart's other duties, he had to negotiate with invading armies to reduce the exorbitant sums required of the people of Eilenburg. Rinkart was exhausted and uncelebrated at the end of his life and lasted little more than a year after the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which concluded the Thirty Years War.

Nineteenth-century accounts suggested that Rinkart's lyrics celebrated the Peace of Westphalia (Hymnary), but if the words were composed in 1637, then his poetry preceded the treaty by more than a decade. As to our own Thanksgiving traditions: Although the Pilgrims had some music, "Now Thank We All Our God" was certainly not part of what we think of as the first Thanksgiving in America in 1621. Nor was the hymn yet in widespread English translation by the time of the first official Thanksgiving in America in 1789.

What I find so intriguing is Rinkart's ability, perhaps passionate *need*, to give thanks to God, even in the midst of war, famine, disease, and death. We, too, have had years of a kind of plague, and now we're told that three viruses this winter might yet stress our health system and cause further suffering. As individuals, many of us have avoided the direct consequences of our nation's long wars and political upheavals, but food insecurity and climate change threaten not only much of the world but many of those close to home. We, too, have suffered personal loss, illness, despair. But do we thank God only for the advantages that we have, or do we trust Him and know that He is always with us? Do we mean it when we say, "Thy will be done"? Are we thankful for the miracle of our existence, the beauty all around us, the opportunity to love and to alleviate someone else's pain? Martin Rinkart's story is an example of abiding faith that transcends all of the particular circumstances of our lives.

~Written by Maurine Slaughter

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