

Martin Rinkart was a pastor and hymn writer during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) in Germany. Not only did he have to deal with the long-running war but also a pestilence that decimated the population as he presided over their many deaths. He wrote the hymn NOW THANK WE ALL OUR GOD as a table prayer for his family. Here are the notes on the hymn from A NEW CENTURY HYMNAL COMPANION: A GUIDE TO THE HYMNS, ed. By Kristen L. Forman, p. 421:

Martin Rinkart was pastor in Eilenburg, Saxony, the town of his birth. The walled city was a refuge for many fleeing war and pestilence. Left as the only clergyman in town, he often buried as many as 40 or 50 persons in one day. Although his wife died of the pestilence, Rinkart survived.

Pondering his words is very helpful to me during our own time of pestilence:

*Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms, hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.
O 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 God's grace, and guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills in this world and the next.*

The context of his work, not unlike our own, was a scene of relentless death. Yet Rinkart wrote and sang of thanks! The hymn celebrates the 'wondrous things' done by 'this bounteous God.' We can picture pastor Rickard with his children counting out, one by one, 'countless gifts of love.' The hymn invites us to cling to God's grace that 'frees us of all ills' in all imaginable futures. The words are as sure, bold, and as awe-filled as any found in the Bible.

The hymn can give us direction for our lives right now. Two things in particular strike me. First is to engage in *relentless, uncompromising hope*. This is more than an easy assurance that "we will get through this." It is rather the conviction that God will not quit until God has arrived at God's good intention. There is a purpose at work in, with, under, and beyond our best resolves. That holy purpose is tenacious, steadfast, and relentless, that we and all of God's creation will come to wellbeing. The task of the church is to hope in a way that is grounded in the good faithful resolve of God.

But the second task is the work in the meantime to be *witnesses to the abiding hesed (mercy) of God* that persists amid pandemic. It is the witness that we are not abandoned. We do this by kind gesture in a time of fear, by generosity and hospitality in a time of self-preoccupation, and to always remember that the lethal force of this virus is not and can never be outflanked by the goodness of God. We have this simple witness of Pastor Rinkart with his willingness to sing and pray, even with death as close as his own household. Faith is indeed "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1). It

boggles to know that our faith is entrusted to fallible folks like us. A devoted pastor of the 17th century points the way, and left us with a song in our hearts to claim as our own in this challenging moment. (help from Walter Brueggemann, in JOURNAL OF PREACHERS, 3/31/2020)

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