

Three Testimonies of Thanksgiving
Wasilla Bible Church
November 22, 2009

Pastor Larry: It is a little bit of a different service, and so the welcome bag won't explain that, so I'm going to take a few moments to let you know where we're going today. It is Thanksgiving week and as we do that we always like to take the Sunday before Thanksgiving, because so many of our people scatter to various places during Thanksgiving week out of state and around the state. So we like to take the Sunday before, and we like to focus on giving thanks to our God as a congregation. And we do it the Hebrew way. The Hebrews didn't have...the Jewish people didn't have...a word for 'thank-you' in the Old Testament. The way you said 'thank-you' was you spoke well of the person in front of others. And that was the way you showed your gratitude. And so on the Thanksgiving Sunday one of the things we like to do is really focus on congregationally speaking well of God in front of each other.

And that's why today the theme for the whole day is expressed in Psalm 34, a passage that I just love. It's a verse that was set for times like this, when Israel would come together for worship and especially during their times of thank offerings. And they would say

I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth.

And then the second verse strikes me. He says

My soul will make its boast in the LORD; the humble will hear it and rejoice.

What the writer is saying is 'I'm gonna tell what God has done, and if I'm gonna brag about anything it's gonna be what God has done, not what I've done. And I wanna say things in such a way that those who are down, and those who are hurting, will be encouraged by it.' And then the invitation comes:

O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt His name together.

That's our theme for the day. So much so that in this service we're not gonna be having our normal sermon and preaching/teaching time. Instead, we're gonna be having three individuals that will be sharing their testimony, their witness to the glory and the grace and the goodness of God's presence in their life. They're nervous about this, they're scared about it, everything else; but they're also convinced that God's been touching their life, and they wanna speak to that. It's their way of saying 'Thank You' to Him. It'll be LaRae Lacrosse, and then there'll be Sarah Novak, and then lastly Willie Shelton. And they will come at various points in the service. We're not gonna introduce them at each point. I'm just letting you know that as we go on there'll be a song or two, then one of them will speak. And they'll take about five – seven minutes to express in their own words God's presence in their life in specific ways. And that's the way this morning's service will go.

Then this evening we're gonna turn this whole room into kind of a huge living room. There's gonna be tables set up everywhere with pies everywhere, and we're gonna come in and enjoy our annual pie feast. But we're gonna focus, as we come together and we share fellowship together and we eat pies together...the focus tonight will be upon let's talk about what God is doing in our lives around table. Let's give thanks by speaking well of Him in front of others. And so it'll be an expressive night for everyone tonight.

I encourage you to be a part of all of this. I forgot my little clicker up here, so let me grab it. I wanna explain one word that you're gonna hear oftentimes today. It's a word we have used for years around here, and you will probably hear our speakers mention it. And it's a term we call 'sightings.' And when we use that term we speak of evidence of the invisible God at work in our lives; evidence that the eyes of faith see of God working in and around your lives and experience. And all three of our speakers today will have been through our fall application groups that we ran this fall. We'll run another set in the winter and another set in the spring. But all three of our speakers were in those groups. And the focus of those groups is practicing and developing the skill of seeing God at work in your lives. And they may well use these words, 'sightings', as they tell of as they were in those classes and they watched in their lives, what they saw of God at work there. So that's where our service will be goin' today.

LaRae Lacrosse: Hi! My name is LaRae Lacrosse, and I am a little nervous. But I've been assured I've been well prayed for this week, and I keep telling myself it shouldn't be scary to talk to a bunch of Christians about God. And if there are any heathens out there, I used to be one, so you're not very scary either. ☺

My husband, Mark, and I just finished one of the application groups that was going on this fall. And if you haven't done one yet, don't miss out. They're really good, and a great way to get to know...to get yourself in the habit of looking for God's work in your life on a daily basis. Larry asked me to share a couple things that came out of our group. The first thing I'd like to share about was the week we'd been assigned the reading of Gideon in the book of Judges. It happened that I was going through the book of Judges in my Tuesday morning bible study with Kristy Tracy, and coincidentally we were studying the story of Gideon the same week there that we were in our home group, which was really kind of fun. I got to...I got the opportunity to read through that twice with different focuses each time, one on the history of Gideon, and the other looking for attributes of God in there.

That week I'd had just a little bit of a struggle as just...oh, what is the word I'm lookin' for?...feeling my inadequacies as a mom of four. I guess that there's probably some moms of you out there who can relate. I so often feel that I say the wrong thing at the wrong time, or the right thing at the wrong time, or the right thing with the wrong tone of voice, or the wrong expression on my face, or...you know what I mean. Anyway, it had been one of those weeks and it was really an encouragement to read through the book of Gideon and see Gideon's own self-doubt and his questioning of God's will for his life, and God's patience and personal touch in his life, of allowing him those questions and just continuing to tell him that 'I'm with you, and yes, I do mean for you to do this. It is your job.'

That morning, at my Tuesday morning study, Kristy had brought a coffee mug that she passed around for us, and it was a hand-made pottery mug that she said she fished out of a reject bin somewhere, when they were on vacation, for a dollar. It was far from perfect. It had cracks and chips, and it was misshapen, kind of a funny color; but it was her go-to mug. She took it every morning. That's what she'd have her coffee in and it was perfect for the job she had it for. It held the perfect amount of coffee, it kept it the perfect temperature, it fit her hand perfectly, and it even fit perfectly into the cup holders in her car. And the lesson I took away from there was that I am perfectly suited for whatever God lays in front of me. I don't have to be perfect to do what He's asked me to do.

Fast forward from there a couple of weeks later and we've been assigned our final reading of Luke chapter 9. And I'd had a pretty ordinary week, an ordinary week of typical highs and lows—emotional highs and lows. My husband, Mark, will tell you that in a household of four women emotional stability is a myth. It's up and down, all over the map every week. And it had just been one of those weeks. And so my sighting for the week ended up being my reading out of Luke chapter 9. Because what I saw in there was Jesus' complete immutability, His unchanging, steadfast, relentless pursuit of His Father's will. From the opening verses where He's telling the disciples...giving them their instructions to go out and share the gospel message, and to not take...He says to not take the cloak, or tunic, or staff, or whatever, and to just give the message. 'And if you encounter someone who doesn't receive it,' He tells them to shake the dust off their feet and move on, and just continue proclaiming the message. And I saw in there that Jesus is unchanged and unmoved and unswayed by people's reception of Him, what people think of Him. He just continues to proclaim the message.

In verses 18 through 20 He's asking the disciples *"Who do the multitudes say that I am?"* And they give a variety of responses. *"Some say You are John the Baptist. Some say You're Elijah."* And He asks them, *"But who do you say that I am?"* And Peter, of course, answers, *"You are the Christ, the Son of God."* And what I saw there was that He's not moved or changed or swayed by what people say about Him. He just continues to be God.

Then we go to the Mount of Transfiguration, and the disciples encounter Him speaking with Moses and Elijah. And it seems pretty evident that Moses and Elijah knew Him from before, from when He was in heaven, as God. And if that's not enough, then God speaks. And God says, *"This is My Son, in whom I am well-pleased. Listen to Him."* It's clear that He was not changed, or moved, or swayed by His location. He was God in heaven, He was God while He was here on earth, He was even God when He went into hell and snatched the keys of death from Satan, and He remains God today.

The disciples move on from there. Immediately they begin arguing over who's going to be greatest in heaven. I don't know if they thought being friends with God, they should get some special perks? I don't know. They were arguing. Jesus isn't moved by that either. He just pulls aside a little child and tells them that 'The least of you will be the greatest in heaven. Jesus is not swayed, or changed, or moved by our financial success, our friendships, our social status, or our political affiliations. He just appoints who God asks Him to to the position that is required of them.

Even at the very end of the chapter He encounters a few people who say they want to follow Him. And He...the first one He tells, 'The birds of the air and the beasts of the field have homes, but I have nowhere to lay My head.' He doesn't promise them that the road will be easy if they follow Him, but they must be steadfast. The next two have arguments and excuses...not arguments, excuses...of family obligations. And He tells them that if...I'm gonna read this one... "*No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.*" He's not swayed, or moved, or changed by His circumstances, His location, His friendships, or whatever. And He asks us to be steadfast in our relentless pursuit of God's will for our lives as well. And He gives us the power to do that, and I'm thankful that despite my changing circumstances and emotions, and friendships, and financial status or whatever, God is still immutable.

Sarah Novak: Good morning! I'm Sarah Novak, and thanks for your graciousness in listening to me this morning. I'd really like to encourage you, just as LaRae did, to if you have an opportunity take part in the application groups this winter or spring. It's a wonderful experience. My husband, Steve, and I signed up for the Friday night application group—the only time we could really squeeze it into our schedules. And we were so grateful for it just for some extra scheduled time together, to be focused spiritually together, meeting new friends, reconnecting with familiar faces at church, and an opportunity for accountability in spending more time with God individually. And probably one of the biggest draws to the Friday night group, for us, was the potluck, which was so fun, and also an opportunity to not have to do the dishes when we got home, which was great.

I just want to share with you a little bit about a sighting that I had, my very first sighting. And it actually is a sighting that I got to witness in my own son's life. My son, David, is seven, and we've had a lot of changes in our family this fall. For the first time both of my kids are in school. David is in second grade and Abby is in kindergarten. And along with that I went back to work full time, teaching for the first time since I had both of my children. And my husband's own workload has increased a lot as well. So needless to say, we've had lots and lots of transitions this fall. Our family time is a little different than it used to be...a whole lot of time at school and not as much time at home. We're having a great time with it, but it means things like Fishing Crew homework maybe doesn't get done every single week. And the weekends are a time when we can cram in a lot of fun and some extra family time.

And one October...one Sunday in October (excuse me) I had a plan with my kids. All week they had been asking and waiting to go to the skate park after church. Not my favorite activity, but one of their favorite activities. And so one Sunday morning I put on my 'Supermom' cape and got up really early, and made lunches and packed changes of clothes, and the bikes were in the van. We were ready to go on our way to church. And even that morning I had a little extra time. And since I had slacked quite a bit this fall in getting David's Fishing Crew verses read each week...I post...flagged each of those with a Post-It Note™ in my bible with the plan of having David read those out loud to us in the car. And we would have an opportunity to talk about them.

Well, our plan was going great. We were in the car, on time...which was a miracle in itself, and had enough time to actually read and discuss all five of the verses. One of the verses that morning was Romans 8:28; and in Romans 8:28 it says 'For God works for the good for those who love Him.' That's a condensed version of it. And David and I had a nice conversation about that verse and what it means. And to someone who's seven, often that could mean, 'well, so if I'm good is God gonna give me whatever I want,' and we had a nice talk about how God is not like Santa Claus or a fairy godmother, but instead God looks for us to love Him and acknowledge His plan. And when we see that He has a plan it's much easier for us to find the good in that.

And so we entered into church and we were excited about our plans afterwards, and came out of the church after service to pouring-down rain. And I was just waiting for that downpour of disappointment from my own children. But I was pleasantly surprised. And no, that's not my sighting, but it continues on. My children just really wowed me with how they were able to just say, 'Well maybe we could have a Plan B'. And we decided we'd go swimming later that afternoon. And we went home and unpacked our bikes and got everything put away. And no sooner had I laid out all the bread for sandwiches for lunch then my telephone rang, and it was a good friend who was on her way to "The Lion King" and wanted to know if I could join her because her daughter had gotten sick and she had an extra ticket.

Well, I would have loved to, but Steve was at work and I had to say 'no'. And she was getting a little desperate to find someone to take the ticket. She was on her way, the show started soon, and we were kind of brainstorming some different folks she could call that lived on her way. And none of them...either she knew they were busy already or knew they were out of town, or something. And she was going into town with her two young boys, who are friends with my son David. And I said, "Well, would you want to take David, and then I can take your daughter with my family with David's ticket next week." So, sure enough, that was our plan. And David was so excited.

When I hung up the phone I said, "Would you like to go to "The Lion King" with your two good friends?" And you know, who's gonna say no to that? So he was very excited. And this is where my sighting begins, because this was such a memorable moment for both David and for I. Because not only did this young man read in the Bible that very morning that God works for the good for those that love Him, but he had to change plans mentally, in his mind, for that day. And so this was a time when we stopped for a minute and we thanked God for this opportunity for him to attend "The Lion King". And we also thanked God because right at that moment David could see, in his own seven-year-old interpretation, 'Hmm, so when I do the right thing...God's asked me to obey my mom, God's asked me to treat others respectfully, God's asked me to accept things that I can't change...and when I do that, then maybe something good's gonna happen to me, or I can see the good in a situation.' And right at that moment David was able to see scripture and apply it to his own life. And God's word became real for David.

And it was such an amazing experience to observe God capture the heart of my son, and see him believe what God said. And the reason this was such a huge sighting was because I got to watch it. And as a mom, watching God work in the lives of your children is such an answered prayer. But also, seeing your children captured by God is such a relief, truly; such a blessing.

In our application group this fall we focused on the attributes of God. And I don't know about you, but for me I've been blessed by God over and over and over again in my life. And often, taking the time to look at Him working in my life is how I've been able to accept certain events that happened, how I've been able to praise Him for working in my life, and sometimes...especially in the last few years...watching Him work out His plan in my life and seeing Him work in particular situations is how I found some hope. And it's really neat when you have those moments and you can say, "Wow! God really did that for me! That is so great! That is so cool! God's working and I got to see it!"

But the thing I really took away from these application groups was a step deeper than that. And that is not only watching for God working in our life, but actually putting an attribute as a label onto what is God doing and why is He doing that, a label of His character. And so one of the attributes that I identified in my sighting, when I shared at first week, was "True", and true meaning that God doesn't change for us, that God is faithful. And David got to see God being true. His word happened; it was real for him right there. And I got to see God being true and answering my prayers, and watching that scripture come to life for my son as well; but also seeing His all-presence, that He was there on a rainy day; in the whole scheme of the skate park plan that God showed up.

Actually giving labels to some of those workings and sightings in how God works in our life was a step more for me, a step where I could actually see God more personally, not just say "Wow, God's working in my life, and it feels so good, and I feel so blessed." But no, more than that. Watching how He's all-powerful. Recognizing that He's all-present. Recognizing that He's immutable, and true, and merciful. And so I've been so blessed watching over, and over, and over again. And I'm telling you, the more you pay attention to it, the more it's there. It is so awesome. But watching for these particular characteristics of God and what He's revealing to me about Himself. So I really encourage you to take part in those application groups.

Willie Shelton: Hi! I'm Willie. And Joel asked me to share a little bit about a sighting, or many sightings, that have been happening in my life. You know, we sing this song at the end of every service now that Joel wrote. And it's kind of been going through my mind for a really long time as a closing song. And it's truly transformed the way I've been living my life lately, and I wanna share with you how that's kinda happened.

I'm the kind of guy that...there is no off-limits topic, there's no conversation that I won't enter into, there's nobody I won't talk with. I can pretty much carry on a conversation with a rock. And that's the way I've always been. But I'm not one to bring up, like, any sort of topic, necessarily. And my faith has been one of those things that's very special to me, but at the same time I'm not a jump-out-there kinda guy with it. There's been two main ways in my life that I've really shared the gospel, and the first one was back in college. I went to Cedarville University; it's in Ohio. Great little Christian college. And every Friday night I was part of a group called "Open Aairs", and we would go down to Columbus, over to Ohio State University. And there was this place called High Street, and it ran right along the edge of the campus. And lots of homeless people there. We would go as a group and we would bring tracts, and we'd share the gospel and speak with lots of people every Friday night. And I had the opportunity to see several people come to a saving knowledge of the LORD, and it was a great ministry. The other way that I shared my faith was through my personality. I'm the kinda guy that...I'm the bubbly, joyful, giddy, you know, oozing the joy of the LORD kinda guy, and that's the way I've always been. And I've been very comfortable relying on my personality to show others that I love Jesus. And I've always assumed that, you know, if they have a question about how joyful I am they'll ask. And that's about as far as things have been going for me for quite a while.

Then Joel got our team together...we practice on Thursdays before Sundays. And he asked us all, he's like, "So, does anybody have any sightings about how the closing song has been giving you opportunities to witness?" And I was like, "Not really. But at the same time, I didn't know that I was supposed to be lookin' for opportunities." Joel then explained that the song we'd been singing for several months at this point was not a closing song—it was a prayer. And I was like, "Ohhh, right. I'm an idiot."

So every week I come, I sing (and I love to sing, obviously), and listen to Larry speak, and we sing the closing song and I'm out there with you guys, singing the closing song, and hearing Larry say, you know, "Go in grace." And it makes me smile every week that he says that. And I pick up my junk, and I talk with my friends, and my wife and I go down and get the kids, and then we go to the in-laws, and I spend the rest of the Sunday doin' that. It was a closing song to me. I hadn't been praying...nothing.

So I went home that evening and I talked with my wife, and I was like, "I had no idea that this was supposed to be a prayer." So I determined that the following Sunday I was going to pray while singing the closing song. And I learned very quickly that if you don't intend on having God do anything, don't ask, because God is fully capable of saying, "Sure!" And the words say, in the very first line it says,

In every circumstance give us confidence
To speak Your word as Your Spirit leads.

And man, oh man! I went home and I thought about those words, and I started praying them every evening. And all of a sudden these doors just started opening. And I'm not talking like one time it was like "Oh, I got to share with somebody." It was like all of a sudden, every day there was this opportunity to witness. And I was amazed!

I need to point out, though, that the song does not say, you know, "Give me opportunities to lead people in the Sinner's Prayer." It doesn't say that. I believe God was right in Joel's heart when Joel was writing the words to that song, because Joel wrote the perfect words. And it says

Giving witness to the One with power to save,
Jesus Christ, full of truth and grace.

We're supposed to be a witness that we serve God, that we serve Jesus, and that He's full of truth and grace. And I've not been able to lead anybody in the Sinner's Prayer in the past several months, but the opportunity to give witness for God has been everywhere! And it's one of those things that I totally was not ready for.

I always assumed God would use me, whether I was looking or not. And you know, here's the hard truth of it. You can't be used if you're oblivious to the Holy Spirit. And the application groups that we've been in have talked about sightings and seeing God working. And all of a sudden, when you start opening your eyes and paying attention to the fact that God...God is leading all the time; it's not just "Oh, He's paying attention; I'll throw something out there at Him." All of a sudden I realized I was missing all of these wonderful opportunities to give glory to my Lord, but I wasn't...I just wasn't looking for them.

And it's been amazing. In the last several months I've been able to talk to so many different people about so many different things. I've been able to share about God's goodness. I've been able to share about how forgiving He is. A really cool opportunity was I was able to share about how God's forgiveness translates into our own lives, and how we're supposed to forgive others. I've been able to talk about His provisions for my family, both financially and with insurance and with raising my children. I've been able to talk about how God cares about the little details in everyday life. A really cool one was I was able to speak with a guitar student about how much I love Jesus, which was really neat when I found out that he was a brand-new little Christian. I've been able to share with people about how awesome my wife is, and my children are, and how I have like the most amazing in-laws in the whole world.

The people I've been able to speak with I wasn't expecting. I've been able to share about the LORD with my boss, with six or seven coworkers. I've been able to talk with students and guitar students, and even parents. I had a parent come in at parent-teacher conference and I was able to share with her about the LORD. It's just been amazing how many opportunities God is all of a sudden showing me. 'I'm leading, I'm right here.'

Then, in praying that song, every week realizing that God is giving me confidence. He truly gives you confidence when you ask for it. And I'm not a public speaker. I have cotton-mouth right now. I can sing any song with any notes, in front of however many people you put me in front of, but you ask me to speak and I'm not a big fan of it. And yet, here I am. And my prayer is being answered again right now. You know, I'm standing here; I'm speaking His word as the Spirit leads, because He's giving me confidence, because I'm praying that every week. And I made a new commitment this week that I'm going to start praying that for our congregation, too—that you will go from the church and you will pray that prayer and mean it in your heart, and that you'll be receptive to all the opportunities that the LORD puts out there in front of you.

We've got two more songs, and the benevolent offering to do, and Joel asked me to invite you guys to sing with us. We're going to sing "Holy, Holy, Holy". So, thanks for lettin' me share.

[Congregation sings the hymn and the prayer song, and is dismissed.]