“Thanksgiving Psalm"

November 20, 2011
First Presbyterian Church Kingwood
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The Mesha stone - ever heard of it! It's a piece of black basalt that you can find in the Louvre Museum in Paris. And it's important for at least two reasons.

One is because the stone's inscribed. It has writing chiseled into it. And the writing comes from the 9th century BC. The writing actually mentions the "house of David." So it's proof of David's life and legacy.

But the second reason this stone's significant is because along with letters, there are punctuation marks on it. In fact, the Mesha stone's the oldest known writing that uses punctuation. Little dots and large horizontal slashes; they show up all through the story on the stone.

And while they may not look the same as the marks on the Mesha stone, our lives and our stories have punctuation marks on them too.

Some people's lives have question marks on them. Martina Phillips is someone like that. She's the mother of a prodigal son. She hasn't seen her twenty-something second son in four years. But all through the years, she's kept a list of the questions that have punctuated her thoughts.

Sometimes, she says, a single question will stay at the forefront of her thoughts for days. Sometimes, she says questions pop into her mind one after the other in less than ten minutes. But she's kept a list. And after four years, the list has grown long. There are hundreds and hundreds of questions on the list.

So Martina went to her pastor recently, and told him, "I want to give you all my questions. I don't want to have my days filled with question marks?"

Can you identify with Martina. Have your days been filled with question marks lately?

Or maybe your life has been full of commas? Have you been trying to pack your life pretty full lately? It you had to look back and describe the past few weeks of your life, what would you say? I've got a feeling a lot of us might say, "Well in the last few weeks I did this, then I did that and that and that. And when you do enough of that, it's pretty easy to live the kind of life that looks like a run-on sentence, isn't it? So maybe the punctuation marks in your life lately have been commas.

Or maybe, maybe, maybe you're a person who might say, "You know, the truth is my life's been punctuated by a period." Have you ever known someone, someone who had something really painful happen to them at some point in their lives, and they've never really gotten over it? They've never been able to start a fresh sentence since it happened. That event with the period at the end of it still defines their life.

So I wonder what would you say about your life this morning? What's the punctuation mark that most marks your life? Is it the question mark? Is it a comma and another and another. Or is it a period? Or maybe, honestly, it's a combination of all of them.

But stop and think with me for a moment and I think you'll realize something. There's something that all these punctuation marks have in common. There's a common thread, a common theme running through all of them. And that's a search, a search for something more.

For when your life's made up of question marks, commas and periods, it can leave you feeling discontented. And I believe David understood that feeling, because he felt it too. In fact he expressed it repeatedly in the Psalms.

For when you read them, you soon discover two things. First the Psalms tell us a good deal about David's life. And the second thing you'll discover is that David's life was punctuated in much the same way as many of our lives are.

Many of the Psalms demonstrate that David had question marks in his life. Others show us his life moving through a flurry of activities, one after another; a series of commas. Then there are the Psalms that indicate that David's life sometimes came to a complete stop; a period.

But of all the Psalms of David and all the punctuation marks you'll find in them, there is one that we haven't talked about yet. For David's life and his Psalms were often punctuated not with a question mark, a comma, or a period but with an exclamation point; an exclamation point of praise and thanksgiving.

In 1 Chronicles 16, we get a good picture of just how it happened, at least on one occasion. David was King of Israel by popular acclamation. He'd captured the ancient fortress city of Jerusalem. He'd brought the ark of the covenant into the city, so it could reside in the capitol of his new kingdom. He'd wanted to build a temple for the ark. But God had told him through the prophet Nathan that the Almighty Lord had other plans. So instead of a starting a building project, David called for a feast.

And at the feast, standing in front of the tent of meeting with the ark resting inside it, David dedicated an offering; sheep, rams, cattle, bulls. Then he turned to the people, blessed them and invited them to sit down and feast with him. He gave each of them a loaf of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins.

Then he gave directions to Levites at the feast to offer prayers. In fact the Bible says at that point David required the Levites to "to make petition, to give thanks, and to praise the Lord, the God of Israel." So you get the picture, don't you? This is a Thanksgiving feast!

And maybe, though no one knows for sure, but maybe it was at that Thanksgiving feast in Jerusalem that the words of Psalm 100 were first prayed or sung. We don't know. But we do know this. The words of Psalm 100 are punctuated with exclamation marks of thanksgiving and praise.

"Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth! Worship the Lord with gladness! Come before him with joyful songs! ... Enter His gates with thanksgiving! Go into His courts with praise! For the Lord is good! And His steadfast love endures forever!"

How did David write words like that? I want to suggest to you it was a conscious choice. At times, throughout his life, I believe David made a choice to punctuate his life with praise and thanksgiving. You can see it happen as you read through some of the Psalms.

And the interesting thing is that it often happens in a Psalm after lines that are full of question marks, or commas. And it seems to be a decision on David's part, a kind of spiritual discipline.

As hard as his life sometimes could be, David made it a point to remind himself with an exclamation point. God was still good. God was still loving. God was still faithful. And it was time to acknowledge all that. It was time to turn his thoughts to thanksgiving.

Actually, that's part of the reason we're going to turn our thoughtss towards thanksgiving this week as well. For the Pilgrims who first came to America knew David's spiritual habits. They knew it had been passed down from generation to generation among David's descendants. And they saw themselves as David's heirs.

They saw themselves as inheritors of his struggles. Their journey to America wasn't easy. It raised question marks for many of them. And their life once they arrived in the new world was even harder. In the first winter half their number died of cold, disease, malnutrition. In the spring, those who remained alive went to work, constructing better homes, cultivating better crops, day after day, comma after comma.

For some of them though the work was too much. Period. They boarded a supply ship that reached Plymouth harbor empty because its cargo had to be jettisoned in a storm. They intended to return to England. But then another ship arrived full of food and medicine and they changed their minds. They stayed. They persevered.

And, as a second fall faded and winter started to creep into New England, Governor William Bradford, made a proclamation. On November 29, 1621, all colonists, he wrote should cease their strivings, gather together, and following the example of David enjoy a feast of thanksgiving giving praise to God.

It's been almost 400 years now since that November day in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and more than 3,000 years since that day in Jerusalem. But the tradition continues, at least it will for many of us this coming Thursday.

So here’s my invitation to you for Thanksgiving this year. As get ready to go into your dining rooms on Thursday, before you walk in, stand up in your living rooms. Open a copy of a Bible with your family and friends. Read Psalm 100. Give each person who's with you a line to read. Read the lines aloud until the who Psalm's finished. And be sure as you read to put an exclamation point at the end of each line.

Then walk through the door into the dining room. "Enter His gates with thanksgiving! Go into his courts with praise!" And enjoy your feast. I hope it will be a Thanksgiving you'll always remember. And I hope you'll always remember to punctuate your life not only with question marks, commas, and periods, but with exclamation marks of thanksgiving and praise to God.

Let's pray ...