What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me? That’s the question the Psalm asks. In ancient Israel, the Psalms were sung or read in their worship.

Part of their purpose – which is the same purpose that hymns and Bible and congregational readings have today – is to inculcate certain attitudes or virtues or practices into the lives of worshipers.

Part of this Psalm which we didn’t hear this morning says this: The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish.

Reading those words helps the worshipper identify with the Psalmist. We are the people about whom the Psalmist is writing.

Who among us has not experienced – or known someone who has experienced (metaphorically, if not factually) – the surrounding snares of death, the panicking pangs of Sheol, the anguish and distress of serious suffering?

Then the Psalmist (also in a section we did not read) says this: Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful…. When I was brought low, he saved me. He delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

Too often, people read passages in the Psalms literally, as if they are historical accounts of something that actually happened – God reached down and did something for me. If he didn’t do the same for you, perhaps you didn’t pray hard enough, or weren’t a good person.

I really don’t think that is what this Psalm is all about. It’s not an historical account; it’s a worship document for developing an attitude of gratitude to God for all the blessings of life.

All worshippers: in the Temple in Jerusalem, and then later in synagogues throughout the Middle East, sang or read these words together.

People with healed diseases, and people whose diseases were not healed, sang them together. People who succeeded, and people who failed in every endeavor, read them together. People who prospered, and people who scrabbled for every mouthful of food and every stitch of clothing, spoke these words in unison.

Thank you, God. You have delivered my soul from death. You have wiped my eyes of tears. You have kept my feet from stumbling. I walk before you in the land of the living. These words are for everyone. Gratitude can be a universal response.

Joel Hunter is Senior Pastor of Northland Church in Orlando, Florida, a conservative church, very different from ours. But I want to tell you one part of his story, in his own words. He said this:

We returned from a family vacation where our 5-year-old granddaughter, Ava, was her usual playful, exuberant self; and the next day she complained of a headache. Within 24 hours, the neurosurgeon had removed a tangerine-sized tumor from her brain. The pathology report showed the most aggressive form of brain cancer. Our granddaughter, Ava, lost her battle with the disease.

Our family is very close, but it seemed like we could not take another step without the care of friends and strangers – those sent by God to love and encourage us.
You learn in the valley of the shadow of death how precious life is. You learn that you only get one day at a time and there are no guarantees of tomorrow. And while you never want anyone else to go through what you are going through, you also learn something you never could have known outside the desperation – how much love matters.

If you have ever wondered if acts of kindness make a difference, take it from someone who has walked through the valley with his own family – compassion is never wasted. It has the power to give us hope, and to remind us that goodness and mercy do follow us all the days of our lives, and that we will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Goodness and mercy do follow us all the days of our lives.

Those words were affirmed by a man who lost his 5-year-old granddaughter to cancer. That family was carried by God’s love, known through the love of friends and strangers.

Pastor Hunter’s gratefulness to God for the care and love he has known through friends and strangers is so blatantly obvious as to be overwhelming.

God has given us the beauty and goodness of this created world, the deep compassion of family and friends (and strangers), the grace and challenge of Jesus Christ through the church.

And God has given us the ability – and the opportunities – to share the love, justice, and peace of Christ with others in our world.

For all of this, I am deeply grateful.

I think Jesus was grateful to God, also. We don’t usually think about gratitude when we think about Jesus himself. We think about the ways he taught people: parables, challenges, words of hope.

We think about his association with the marginalized and outcast.

We think about his agony in Gethsemane, and his prayer to God to let the cup of suffering pass from his lips. We think about his anger at those who were arrogant, proud, and self-righteous.

But there is one story he told that makes me think he, also, was deeply grateful to God, and it’s the story we heard earlier – part of his Sermon on the Mount.

I picture it happening outside, in a place something like the scene Linda Hancock painted a few years ago for our banner. It’s an early summer day. He’s walking along the road, preaching and teaching.

Matthew records it as one long, uninterrupted sermon, taking three chapters in his gospel; but I think someone interrupted him just after he said, You cannot serve both God and mammon.

You know: But what about my work! What about the big house I’m building! What about my daughter’s fancy wedding! What about the economy! What about … What about….

Maybe several people interrupted him with their concerns.

So he stopped, said, don’t worry so much. He listened for a moment, and pointed upward: Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly father feeds them….

Then he swept his arm across his body, indicating that which was right in front of them, but that they had not noticed:

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one(1) of these…. Seek first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness. All these things will be given to you as well.

A couple of weeks ago, we cut and brought into the house the last fresh flowers we will have from our garden for 7 months. It was 6 or 8 purple cosmos, fragile little things that only
lasted 3 or 4 days before their weak necks caused them to droop and fail, and they had to be tossed.

We didn’t even plant them this year – they came up from seeds from last year’s planting, and grew amongst weeds. They bloomed late, but strong through the near-frosts. We cut them all, right before the 1st killing frost.

As I looked at those fragile purple flowers, they seemed more beautiful than anything else in the room right then; and I found myself giving thanks to God: for the lilies of the field, the beauty of the natural world, flowers growing among weeds, the goodness that surrounds all of us, if we would but look.

One last story: at Community Meals at Luke House this week, Joanne Lenburg told us a story about an inmate she knows through leading worship in our Prison Ministry program at Fox Lake.

She said this person committed a terrible crime and will probably never get out of prison. He had a young daughter; and for some reason – either the family, or the court, or prison rules, he was not allowed to ever see her as she grew.

The work he was given in prison was to work in the room where children come when families come to visit an inmate. Over the years, he has seen several young girls grow up; and even though he is not allowed to see his own daughter, he is grateful he can see these other girls grow, and imagine his own daughter’s growth, in theirs.

In his circumstance – imprisoned for life, unable to see his own young daughter as she grows, I might find gratitude difficult.

He, however – imprisoned and unable to see his daughter – is grateful for something he has.

I began this sermon with a question from our Psalm reading, and I never answered it; so I would like to end by doing that.

*What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me?* Or, in the words of our Choral anthem – *What shall I render to my God for all the good things God has done for me?*

The answer to that question, purely and simply, is gratitude. When it is so strong that tears cloud your eyes and your voice quakes, gratefully give praise and thanks to God.

When you experience it so deeply that your knees tremble, give praise and thanks to God.

When it comes so quickly and clearly that you are speechless, turn your eyes upward and silently give praise and thanks to God.

When you look across the breakfast table at your partner, your spouse, take his or her hand and, in gratitude, say a silent prayer of thanks to God.

We only get one day at a time, as pastor Joel Hunter reminded us. Tomorrow is guaranteed to no one.

This day, this moment, is blessed. With all your heart, in gratitude and devotion, give praise and thanks to God. Amen.