

AT ALL TIMES



Praise Хвалитъ

June
2020

The first verse in Psalm 34 reads, “I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.”

I read this verse a few days ago and stopped for a second. The implications of those words “at all times” and “continually” struck me. If the author of this psalm were alive right now, in a world grappling with the effects of a worldwide pandemic, would he be blessing the Lord? If he saw the division caused by politics and hatred and sin, would he find a reason to praise God? You don’t have to search very far to find negative news or reasons to be discouraged these days, so how can we bless the Lord and praise him in all of this?

As I read all of Psalm 34, I’m reminded to put everything in the proper perspective. Yes, there are many needs in our world—but God is still in control. Because of this, we always have something to rejoice about.

Truthfully, I can also see many reasons for joy, reasons to thank God. He is still working in our lives, in the world, in His

church, and therefore we have hope: hope for eternal life as well as for acts of grace and mercy in this life.

The Role of the Church

Just over a week ago the Russian government allowed churches to open again. It’s exciting to gather in church, although the excitement is mixed with questions and confusion about masks, how close we should sit, how to take communion, etc. It’s been three months since we’ve sat in a room with fellow believers and sung the hymns together—so much different from the weeks of singing alone while muted on zoom—and it’s wonderful to see each other.

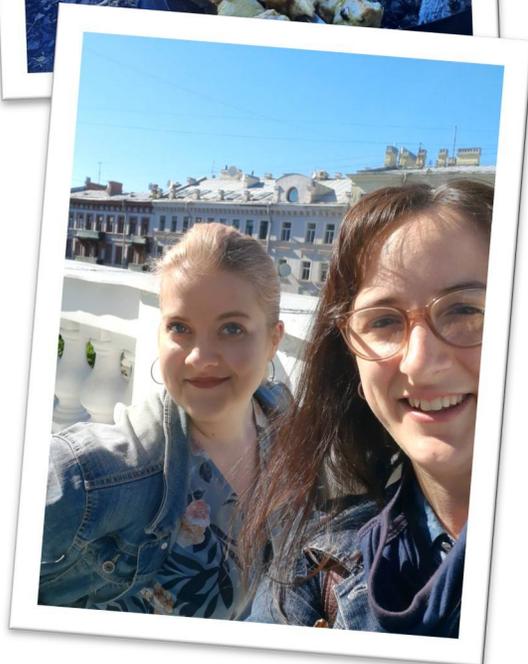
While we are grateful that we can confess our faith as a congregation again, the church has not been inactive for the past three months. Here in Russia, pastors and church workers have rallied around those in need, providing food and hygiene supplies for those who weren’t allowed or weren’t able to provide for themselves. The internet

Prayer Requests

“I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.”

Psalm 34:4-5 (ESV)

- For the planning and preparation for summer camps
- For Russia as restrictions are lifted and people start gathering again
- For the upcoming constitutional referendum on July 1st
- For those who are sick or recovering from the corona-virus, or mourning those who passed from it



Spending time outside, enjoying the fine weather while it lasts!

has been used as a tool to bring God's Word to others, and even now, when restrictions are being lifted, several congregations are continuing to stream Bible studies and sermons online.

Confirmation classes continued in an online format during the self-isolation. At the first Russian service I attended at St. Anna's, one woman, Olga, was confirmed at the beginning of the service.

She publicly confessed her faith in the Triune God and Jesus' work of salvation in front of us and was accepted as a member of the church body. Next week St. Mary's will also be having a confirmation service for a group that has completed the "Basics of the Christian Faith" course and are ready to confess that faith before others. These believers can say they were learning about an almighty God while living through a worldwide pandemic—that's faith for you!

Making Use of the Time

From a human perspective, it seems that three months of sitting at home would be a waste—it's hard to get

over the fact that work was stopped or slowed, projects and plans were cancelled, meetings and gatherings were banned. I like to have plans, goals and to-do lists, and a worldwide pandemic runs directly against my organizing instinct. But God did not allow this time to be wasted. As I look back over the past three months, I see how relationships continued, people were still served, projects were started and completed. I've had more time to do work that otherwise got shoved to the backburner (meaning it never got done). For example, I finished putting together a hymnal supplement for our congregation and editing our service folder. I've also been digitizing used lesson plans and organizing my lesson materials, so I can find what I need easier and share my

resources with others. I've had time and energy to do more homework for my Russian classes. God did not allow this time to be wasted.

Another example of a good use of the time was our "Conversation Partners" project. The volunteers in the US used their time to connect with English language learners here in Russia, and I'm grateful for the sacrifice of service the volunteers gave to participate. Overall the program was a great success and both the students and the volunteers were very enthusiastic! In addition to having good conversations and opportunities to practice English, the volunteers were able to share their faith and what they believed, and, even in one case, pray with the students. These personal connections of faith are so important in ministry, but on a larger scale, this project helped people to become aware of the presence of the Lutheran Church in Russia. I pray that good fruit will come out of this project, and I praise God that we were able to put it together so quickly.

Looking Ahead

Slowly, life is returning to pre-quarantine status. Stores are starting to open, and people are coming out of their homes. But there are still a lot of unknowns. The summertime is usually full of camps organized by the various parishes of the Ingrian church. There are children's camps, youth gatherings, confirmation camps and English camps. During a typical summer, church workers have to choose which activities they'll participate in, because it isn't possible to help with everything. This year will be much different, of course, as we wait to see what gatherings will be allowed and under what regulations. It's encouraging, at least, to see some return to normalcy. Whatever happens in the future, I praise God for watching over us during the past three months, and I know that he will continue guiding us as we face the unknowns of the future.

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