

And For Everything Else Thanks
Thanks for Everything that Builds Faith

Psalm 34:1-8

Ypsilanti First United Methodist Church

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As we continue to count our blessings, I want to tell you a true story of something that happened a few years ago at a famous Jazz club in New York City. This jazz club has been around for more than 70 years and it is called The Village Vanguard. I know some of you like Jazz and you might have even visited this club.

Jazz Superstars play this club all the time, and one weekday night a few years ago, the amazing trumpet player Wynton Marsalis, was at the Village Vanguard as a part of a small jazz combo. The combo started playing a set and things seemed pretty normal but then Marsalis stepped to the microphone to offer a solo called "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You."

It was a melancholy song, full of murmurs and sighs, and Marsalis performed it with deep feeling and expression. At the climax of the song, he played the final phrase in such a way that the trumpet seemed to give actual voice to the heartfelt words "I don't stand ... a ghost ... of ... a ... chance ..." The audience sat in awe, listening in silence. And Then... it happened.

In the middle of that sacred silence, at the song's most dramatic point, someone's cell phone erupted in a chirping, sing-song electronic melody. In an instant, the spell was broken. People in the audience giggled nervously and no one knew what to do.

Marsalis paused for a beat, and stood motionless. His eyebrows arched. The embarrassed cell-phone owner fled the scene. Marsalis could have stepped down at that moment and quit the gig, disgusted. After all, he is a king of jazz and doesn't need to perform in little clubs with rude cell-phone users.

But he didn't move. Instead, he put his lips to his trumpet and replayed the stupid cell-phone melody note for note. Then he played it again, and began improvising variations on the tune. He changed keys once or twice and then seamlessly eased back into a ballad tempo, and in just a few minutes, finishing his improvisation, he was exactly

where he had left off: "I don't stand ... a ghost ... of ... a ... chance ... with ... you ..."

The audience erupted into a standing ovation. Knowing that they had witnessed something extraordinary. The transformation of a rude interruption into a moment of glory.

Wynton Marsalis didn't allow an unexpected shock to stun him or stop him or silence him, but instead he was open to the possibilities of the moment and he used it to a greater glory. A performance no one would ever forget.

There's a message in this for all of us. And as we think about what we are thankful for at the top of the list ought to be our thanks to God who is the master of divine improv. Everyday, God works to turn dead ends into new life, adversity into triumph. Agony into glory. God doesn't promise us just a beautiful little tune, a nice, uninspiring little life with no variation and no tensions to resolve. God does promise to be with each of us through the sufferings we are bound to face, and God is at work in every one of us to turn our body of humiliation into a body of glory.

If you don't believe me, listen again to the words of Psalm 34 that we heard earlier today.

**I bless God every chance I get
I live and breathe God...
God met me more than halfway
God freed me from my anxious fears
When I was desperate, I called out
and God got me out of a tight spot
open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see how good
God is.ⁱ**

As we count our blessings. As we name them one by one, we count God as one of these blessings. Our amazing God, whose grace improvises and transforms our pain and sorrow into something more than we ever thought possible.

Last week, I talked about another talented trumpet player, Patrick Henry Hughes. Patrick Henry Hughes is blind and in a wheel chair as he is also unable to walk. A few years ago, when Patrick decided to attend the University of Louisville, he wanted to play in the University Pep band. That was his goal and his dream. Playing in the

pep band at the Cardinal basketball home games was something he was looking forward to and so was his dad, who was unable to get Cardinal tickets. Now with his son in the pep band, he would be in the arena for all the home games. Both father and son were looking forward to this.

However, there is a mandatory school rule that if you want to be in the pep band, you also have to be in the marching band. Patrick and his dad met with the marching band director expecting that he would understand their predicament and wave the rule. But the band director simply said—you have to be in the marching band and then you can try out for the pep band. Patrick and his dad then assumed that the band director meant that Patrick would sit on the sidelines during halftime and play his trumpet from there. But the director went on to tell them that Patrick was expected to be a full participant of the band and that meant being a part of the marching formations.

Therefore, Patrick and his dad went to band camp—the only 2 person member of the marching band and Patrick played his trumpet and his dad pushed his wheel chair in formation. And people noticed. Soon the local paper did a story on them, and then Sports Illustrated and then ESPN, and Oprah and Ellen and it went on from there. And now, between marching band, speaking engagements and new book which came out last month, Patrick Henry hasn't had time for the pep band.

In his book he shares these words:

*"My goal was to be in the pep band and to avoid the marching band. When it was obvious that all roads were leading to the marching band we could have forsaken our goal and quit. But I was determined to be in the pep band, so we changed course and embraced the marching band. And when we did we discovered that the marching band rewarded us in many wonderful ways...Life never runs smoothly and you can bet Murphy's law will come into play somewhere along the line—whatever can go wrong will. When life is unkind and you are not sure what to do or which way to go, pray about it. And when things look their worst, don't look back, look up instead. Have faith in where you are going. And faith in the one who is guiding you. If the bridge is out ask God for Plan B and God will have it ready for you."*ⁱⁱⁱ

Of course this means that we have to be open to Plan B when it shows up! Of course this means we need to be flexible and to look for the possibilities that come our way.

Of course this also means that we need to be willing to embrace a new path even if it is different than our plans, dreams or goals.

Sometimes, many times, most times the improvisations of life are the very best part of the music. Improvisations, composed on the spot, as we embrace a new path and follow the spirit's lead. Improvisations which get us out of a tight spot and remind us again that God is with us.

As we count our blessings, we thank God for being with us and for leading us from despair to new life.

As we count our blessings, we respond with gratitude because God saves our lives with the improvisation of grace.

That's something we can all be thankful for. Amen.

ⁱ Psalm 34:1-8 from Eugene Peterson's *The Message/Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language*

ⁱⁱ Hughes, Patrick Henry. *I am Potential: Eight Lessons on Living, Loving and Reaching your Dreams*, p. 163