SO WHAT: Thanksgiving is traditionally a day set aside to give thanks. But, as Paul reminds us, this is something that should characterize every Christian each day, and not simply be relegated to a National holiday.

Many of us were taught valuable lessons as we grew up. One of the lessons I learned when I was a child was to say “thank you”. Saying “thank you” is both a polite thing to do and a way of expressing our gratitude. This is an important week for many people around the United States. On Thursday many of us will gather here for our Thanksgiving breakfast and the Presbyterian Women Thank Program and Offering, and then head home to partake in that time honored ritual of eating turkey and dressing and pecan pie and then following it up with a mid-afternoon nap—a great tradition, unless you are dieting and trying to lose weight! Now, when we gather around the thanksgiving table, what will you be thankful for? Will you recall the various gifts you received during this past year? Will you remember all of the wonderful things that have happened to you? Will you think about what you have been able to accomplish? Thanksgiving, while important, can be a little difficult for us Christians. You see, Thanksgiving Day comes but once a year, but we must make certain that we not only say thank you all year long, but that our lives be marked by gratitude. Scottish minister Alexander Whyte was known for his uplifting prayers in the pulpit. He always found something for which to be grateful. One Sunday morning the weather was so gloomy that one church member thought to himself, "Certainly the preacher won't think of anything for which to thank the Lord on a wretched day..."
like this." Much to his surprise, however, Whyte began by praying, "We thank Thee, O God, that it is not always like this."

Now, we must not think that Paul is asking us to live a life with a constant smile, ignoring the difficulties and tragedies and struggles we face. Remember, as Paul writes this letter he is in prison—perhaps facing death—and realizes that the Christians in Philippi are experiencing or are about to experience some form of persecution. Perhaps you can relate to Paul’s experience as the holidays approach. Maybe one of the questions you have is can you even be thankful? Perhaps this has been a difficult year and you feel this Thanksgiving Day is going to be difficult. But let us be clear about something, Paul is not asking the Christians in Philippi—nor us—to ignore the realities of life; but he is challenging them, and thereby challenging us, to live beyond the present circumstances; to live beyond the current conditions and live in the hope that surrounds us. In today’s scripture passage there are three things that jump out, Paul says: Rejoice in the Lord; the Lord is near; and do not worry about anything.

Paul begins this section by saying, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Rejoice is a form of joy, and it is far more than being happy. You see, happiness is a virtue of the world while joy is a Christian virtue. Happiness is entirely external; it is circumstantial; it depends on the things we have or can acquire; it depends on our circumstances and our emotional state of mind. On the other hand, joy is internal; it flows from the nature of God and it wells up within those in whom God’s Spirit dwells. Paul is calling us to have joy in the Lord—always. Our joy is in the Lord because God is our creator; it is through Him that everything came into being; it is through His love and grace that Jesus Christ came into the
world to live and teach and die and rise again so that all of us would have life and have life more abundantly. And He sends His Spirit to live within us. It is those things that Paul has in mind when he says “Rejoice in the Lord.” He is calling us to move beyond the circumstances and conditions that may cause us to be happy or sad, and to live in God and be filled with His joy.

One of the things to remember as we rejoice in the Lord is that He is near. What did Paul mean? Well, it is possible that Paul was speaking of the imminent return of Jesus—for that is a belief and hope with which he lived his life. But, he may also have been meaning to capture the thought that is reflected in many of the Psalms. In Psalm 34 we read, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.” This is good news to those who have experienced loss and sadness; it is good news to those who feel overwhelmed and beaten down. It is good news because it proclaims that despite the things you are experiencing which might lead you to think God is absent, the Lord is near. He has not forgotten us; he is not on vacation; He is not off duty. He is always near us. In fact, Psalm 145 says, “The Lord is near to all who call on Him.” God is not some distant being, but is right here with us. I heard a preacher a while back that began his message by saying, “Your God is bigger than you think. But not so big that he does not know you.” The God who created the stars in the heavens and every person on earth and every animal and plant, knows you—and knows you by name. You cannot hide from Him. Your circumstances cannot push Him away. Now, to be sure, we will face difficulties, being a Christian is not a magical existence where everything is always perfect. But when we accept Christ we know that we are ultimately safe and secure in the hands of God. Through Jesus Christ our sins were forgiven; through Jesus Christ sin and death were defeated; through Jesus
Christ we have the gift of eternal life. So remember—at all times—the Lord is near…so, **rejoice in the Lord always.**

The last phrase that really jumps out here is “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” For Paul, the antidote to worry is prayer. Prayer is talking with God. We are urged to come before God with our prayers—to come with our wishes and needs; to come with the needs of those around us. If we remember that God is near, it is not a stretch to come before Him in prayer. But notice how our prayers are to be brought to God—with thanksgiving. We come with thanksgiving—with gratitude. We bring our prayers to God with thanksgiving, not because we always get what we desire, but because of Him. Whenever we enter into God’s presence we do so with thanksgiving because of His promise to love us and to walk with us. In all matters, be thankful.

On this Thanksgiving Day, as you sit down before a plate of turkey and dressing, be sure to take some time to give thanks. Give thanks for the blessings you have received and all the good things you have experienced. But also take a moment simply to give thanks to God—for who He is and for all He has done and is doing, and for loving you.

In a sermon at Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, Gary Wilburn said: "In 1636, amid the darkness of the Thirty Years' War, a German pastor, Martin Rinkart, is said to have buried five thousand of his parishioners in one year, and average of fifteen a day. His parish
was ravaged by war, death, and economic disaster. In the heart of that darkness, with the cries of fear outside his window, he sat down and wrote this table grace for his children:

'Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom His world rejoices.
Who, from our mother's arms,
Hath led us on our way
With countless gifts of love
And still is ours today.'

Here was a man who knew thanksgiving comes from love of God, not from outward circumstances.

May we go and do likewise. Amen.