

Martin Rinkart was called to be the pastor of the Lutheran church in his hometown of Eilenberg, Germany. He arrived there just as the terrible bloodshed of the Thirty Years War was beginning. The city of Eilenberg was a walled city and it became the refuge for political and military fugitives. This, however, caused serious overcrowding, and deadly pestilence and famine swept through the city. Armies overran it three times, leaving death and destruction in their wake. The population of Germany went from 16 million to 6 million during this time.

The Rinkart home was a refuge for the victims, even though he was often hard-pressed to provide for his own family. In the year 1637 the plague was particularly severe. At its peak, Rinkart was the only pastor remaining in Eilenberg, conducting as many as 50 funerals in a day. He performed more than 4000 funerals in that year alone, including that of his beloved wife.<sup>1</sup> Tradition has it that one evening after yet another day of burying scores of people, he came home feeling deeply discouraged. And his response to his own discouragement was to write the following poem:

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;  
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way  
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

Oh, may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,  
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;  
And keep us still in grace, and guide us when perplexed;  
And guard us through all ills in this world, till the next!

During the Vietnam war a young American fighter pilot was shot down over the north. He was captured and became a "guest" at what became known as the Hanoi Hilton. For those too young to know this, this was the prison that American flyers were kept in, and where they were beaten, tortured and in some cases killed. This particular guest got V.I.P. treatment; in other words, he was tortured more than all the others, because his father was the admiral of the US fleet in southeast Asia. For five years this pilot suffered at the hands of his captors until the war ended and he was released.

Just three weeks ago this man, after losing his bid to become president of the United States, stood before the nation and said, and I quote, "I have always been a fortunate man." Senator John McCain, having suffered torture for five years says, "I have always been a fortunate man." And he is leading, as deeply as the president elect, an effort to unite the nation.

Why is it that when some people go through hell they come out and teach us about heaven?

My father-in-law has a magnet on his refrigerator which says, "When you're going through hell, keep going." For some of us in this sanctuary who have lost their jobs due to the sinking economy, I can tell the rest of you, having listened to them, that they are choosing to

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<sup>1</sup> Information for this story is from The Center for Church Music; <http://songsandhymns.org/hymns/detail/now-thank-we-all-our-god>, and also from other sources.

keep going. Thanks to Ken Hoagland and Howie Brand we have a Life Transitions Group up and running. Ken had the idea to start this group now because 20 years ago when he was in a similar situation the church formed such a group and helped him, well, go through hell. Howie became a member of the group, too, and each man's life story has been shaped by how this church became for them a place of five kernels of corn during a time of darkness and fear.

This church is a place of five kernels of corn, a place that helps us go through hell. This place is a herald of heaven amid a landscape of Hades. This place is one of hope amid a climate of fear. This place is where in the past, present and future we are reminded to choose eternity. This place is where the hungry, spiritually or materially, are fed. This place is where the afflicted are comforted and the discouraged are encouraged. This place is where we have the humble audacity to claim to be the body of Christ and thus act as Jesus' hands and heart in a broken and bleeding world.

And this place is more than that. This is also a place that proclaims love amid the banner headlines of fear we see and hear every day. This is a community that practices generosity when the world's wisdom cries hoarding. This place chooses to see abundance, deliberately claims a perspective of plenty, assertively reminds us that we are not individuals struggling alone but rather we are a community journeying together. This place is an incarnate community—Emmanuel—God with us. We are so blessed, so very blessed, to be here with its five kernels of corn. This place is one of thanksgiving. Blessed are you, for you fed me when I was hungry and clothed me when I was naked.

Today we are consecrating our pledges to this place of hopeful abundance, to this place of thanksgiving. The gift we make here is making a difference in people's lives. Yes, because of today's world economy our own church budget is struggling. Our Director of Administration and I are trying to find every bit of savings we can, every bit of non-essential spending we can eliminate. Yet we are in the position of radically cutting our program budget. Many families can give so little now because they have no income, yet they reach into their five kernels of corn to continue to pledge; and we are there to help them go through hell. Many pensioners must cut back their pledge because the stock market dictates their income, yet they reach into their kernels of corn; and we are there to help them go through hell. And many of us are able to give more because our situations are fortunate and our harvests remain full and we want to be there to help this congregation be a beacon of hope, and so we reach into our abundance of corn and give an abundance of kernels, perhaps far more than we have ever imagined giving.

Martin Rinkart made it through hell because he kept his eyes on his neighbors. John McCain made it through hell because he wanted to serve his country. Our Pilgrim forbearers made it through hell because they kept their eyes on heaven. And we will make it through this time because we are a people of faith, standing in the religious tradition of the Pilgrims themselves. Hezekiah Butterworth, American author and poet, remembering the Pilgrims' sacrifice, wrote the following poem.

'Twas the year of the famine in Plymouth of old,  
The ice and the snow from the thatched roofs had rolled;  
Through the warm purple skies steered the geese o'er the seas,

And the woodpeckers tapped in the clocks of the trees;  
And the boughs on the slopes to the south winds lay bare,  
and dreaming of summer, the buds swelled in the air.  
The pale Pilgrims welcomed each reddening morn;  
There were left but for rations Five Kernels of Corn.  
Five Kernels of Corn!  
Five Kernels of Corn!  
But to Bradford a feast were Five Kernels of Corn!

"Five Kernels of Corn! Five Kernels of Corn!  
Ye people, be glad for Five Kernels of Corn!"  
So Bradford cried out on bleak Burial Hill,  
And the thin women stood in their doors, white and still.  
"Lo, the harbor of Plymouth rolls bright in the Spring,  
The maples grow red, and the wood robins sing,  
The west wind is blowing, and fading the snow,  
And the pleasant pines sing, and arbutuses blow.  
Five Kernels of Corn!  
Five Kernels of Corn!  
To each one be given Five Kernels of Corn!"

"The raven's gift eat and be humble and pray,  
A new light is breaking and Truth leads your way;  
One taper a thousand shall kindle; rejoice  
That to you has been given the wilderness voice!"  
O Bradford of Austerfield, daring the wave,  
And safe through the sounding blasts leading the brave,  
Of deeds such as thine was the free nation born,  
And the festal world sings the "Five Kernels of Corn."  
Five Kernels of Corn!  
Five Kernels of Corn!  
The nation gives thanks for Five Kernels of Corn!  
To the Thanksgiving Feast bring Five Kernels of Corn!

Our community, inside and outside these walls, needs our witness of five kernels of corn. Our community needs our proclamation of hope and our witness to abundance. Our community needs Christ's hands and Christ's love to comfort them with God's promise of peace. As our baptismal liturgy reminds us, we baptized to be disciples of him who not to be ministered unto, but to minister. What abundance we share. Amen.

The Reverend George Anastos

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious Abundance, we come before you with dancing hearts and with singing hearts, with hearts full to overflowing with the glorious bounty you spread before us. Gracious Abundance, give us hearts of tender flesh so that we will never take your generosity for granted.

Gracious Abundance, remind us not only of the abundance that feeds our bodies, but the abundant freedom of your commandments which feeds our souls and which enables our communities to be places of abundance for all people. Gracious Abundance, judge us worthy to reflect your image of abundance. Make us wise and generous stewards of your abundance, to preserve it and distribute it so that all creation may be fed: heart, mind, spirit, and body. Amen.