

One of the things we are all aware of in our lives is the reality of pain. Though we try to conceal it, or forget about it, we all deal with loss, with suffering, and it can be overwhelming. But a look deeper and we can also see that as God responds to our suffering, so too does He use us to make a difference.

When the Iron Curtain fell, it became easier for people to travel into Eastern Europe, and among them were missionaries who were trying to evangelize and bring hope to the people.

Among them was Taryn Hutchinson, part of a Catholic missionary group that went to Romania.

She had moved to Bucharest, and it was just 11 months after the revolution that ended the Communist regime there. There were nine Americans serving together in the capital city to bring a message of hope to the university students.

As a team, they had to intentionally plan how to make the holidays fun. They would build new memories, for after all they were a family now.

They days had grown colder and the grayness outside matched Taryn's mood. Life was rustic there. They had no heat, water only on hour per day, and an abundance of rats. They had only received mail once since they had arrived. Taryn had worn those letters thin from reading them often. She missed her family and friends. She missed America.

The team made plans to celebrate Thanksgiving on Saturday, two days after we celebrate it here. Her friend Wendy had tucked cans of pumpkin, corn, and peas into her suitcase when she came, earmarked for Thanksgiving. Marian another missionary brought already-kneaded dough from the bread store to make dinner rolls and crust for Wendy's pumpkin pie. Vicki and Taryn found wrinkled potatoes with long eyes at the meager outdoor market. No one could find the one remaining dish anywhere though. When she made "gobble, gobble" noises in the outdoor market, she learned the word for turkey is curcan. Everyone they asked agreed there were no curcans in Bucharist. If fortunate enough to have meat it would be pork.

They contemplated substituting a chicken, but the chickens were quite scrawnly. They often joked that Romanians killed their chickens by starving them to death. Only a turkey would do that for their Thanksgiving feast.

Her roommate Vicki and she prayed every day for a couple of weeks before Thanksgiving. “Father, we know this is not anything important, but we also know that you love us and you love to give us good gifts. You tell us in your Word to ask, so that’s what we’re doing. We are asking you to please provide a turkey.”

In the evenings, international students from Arab countries made their way door to door through the Foreign Student Dorms selling everything from warm-up suits to demitasse cups. Every time they came, they peddled an entirely different stock. The missionary group referred to it as the Home Shopping Hour.

The night before their Thanksgiving, they heard a knock at their door. Vicki jumped up expectantly. Two young Arab men stood there with a bulging duffle bag.

Taryn asked what they had to sell in her broken Romanian.

One of them answered. The word didn't sound like curcan, but she could understand what he said with his thick accent. It didn't matter, because she knew what they had brought to sell us. She knew God's ways and had experienced those kinds of coincidences so many times before that she had grown to anticipate them.

The other guy reached into a duffel bag and her heart did a flutter kick. He pulled out...a soccer ball.

"Is that all" Taryn asked a bit stunned.

Yes, that was all they had.

She pushed back hot tears. Her hopes had screeched to a halt.

Taryn made her way to the bathroom to cry alone. "Lord was this too much to ask? We've given up so much to be here. Do we have to give up a turkey too?"

The next day the group began to assemble in Mark and Wendy's room for their Thanksgiving meal. Besides the Americans on their team, they had invited several Romanian students, all newly serious about following Christ.

A vase of mums stood in the center of the lace-covered serving table. One by one, they added their food offerings, in chipped enamel plans. No one had pretty serving dishes. No one minded.

Only Daniel and Marian had not arrived yet. Suddenly the sound of a kazoo trumpeting a processional tune wafted in. Scurrying to the door, Taryn got there as Daniel marched in carrying a pan spilled over with a plump turkey. Even Santa with a sack would not have been a more welcomed sight.

They bombarded Daniel with questions. He had bartered for a turkey the night before with one of his many connections. He and Marian had decided to surprise everyone. They succeeded.

Taryn says that their turkey did not come the way she had expected it to. But no matter; they still had a turkey. Her immediate response of discouragement the night before did not stop God from giving.

As they gathered around, John explained to the Romanians about the original Thanksgiving. He said the Pilgrims wanted to thank God for bringing them through the first winter in their new land, and to share their bounty with their new friends. They did too. He went on to say that the Bible tells us to remember what God has done for us in the past and to thank Him for his blessings. John gave them an opportunity to remember aloud.

“I’m grateful for this turkey,” someone said. “It shows us that God cares about the smallest details that touch our lives.”

The Romanians chimed in. “I have new life in Christ.”

“I thank God for sending you to tell us about Jesus.”

“Finally we have freedom” said another. “It is a precious thing.”

Their joy reminded Taryn, once again, of her purpose in being there, worth every sacrifice in her Spartan lifestyle.

They grasped each other's hands and thanked God together for His goodness to them.

The small dorm room overflowed with hard-backed chairs scattered about. Many of the attendees scattered about. Many sat cross-legged on the double bed as they ate from mismatched plates and tin tasting flatware.

Looking back now many years later, Taryn says she had never experienced a better Thanksgiving. Their turkey, a gift from God's hands, tasted divine. She had expected a crummy holiday and instead, created new memories.

Long since returned to the USA, Taryn found herself homesick for Romania, and in all the Thanksgivings since, nothing compared to that one in Romania.

Like Taryn, I think all of us are a bit homesick too. Many of us are having dinner with loved ones and we are of course home in a sense, but I don't know about you but I sure am homesick for normalcy. I'm not seeing as many people I'd like to this Thanksgiving. I'm tired of seeing a sea of masks from the altar and not hearing the hymns, or watching a football game and not hearing people or seeing the happy and cheering fans. But despite all that we have gone through in our world, we can still remember that God is still with us, and He is working through us all.

With respect to seeing the good, as I shared once before, I'll never forget my conversation with Mary Jackson. Mary is a pianist who did a CD of songs devoted to Mary, and has done much work with the poor. When I found her online and read her story, I was able to reach out and have a conversation with her. She lost her husband to ALS, nearly lost two kids, one to an accident and the other when there was an active shooter on her son's campus who was in the yard of the house he was in, and has had tons of personal health problems all the while having difficulties keeping her charity going due to government red tape. Yet there was not an ounce of anger or frustration in her voice. She continues to serve, to live, to play piano on the piano given to her by her late husband, and be a person of

hope. But she said to me when I said Mary do you ever want to throw in the towel or just get overwhelmed with frustration that she looks for silver linings and says there is so much to be grateful for; another breath; her mind; a day of life; the birds outside. The simple things. And I think that when we look at what we've endured, be it with Covid or other things, perhaps like Taryn at first looking around Romania and wondering what did I get myself into, it can be overwhelming. We have suffered; we do not ignore that. But we still have people in our lives; we have a church we are worshipping in; another day of life that we've been given. A good thing to do at the end of the day is to maybe find a few things we are thankful for, and thank God for them, while remembering that no matter what life throws at us, God is with us always.

But with that, we must remember through other people, so many good things happen and continue to happen. Because of those missionaries in Romania, a number of students found God. So as Taryn shared her love of God with others, we too remember we can do so much. Around the parish, so many people volunteer and do so much to reach out, from the Giving Tree response to the money counters and those who came to prepare little gift bags we'll be giving out for the start of Advent. In our families, even if

we aren't making a turkey dinner for 30 this Thanksgiving, remember that it's the simple actions you do for one another that make a huge difference; being kind to a sibling whether you're 10 or 70; being patient; making a card for mom or dad; doing simple chores around the house with love; reading a story to the kids; working to provide for the family. All of these actions of love make such a huge difference, and they are done not just one day but every day of our lives.

Admittedly sitting down to a different Thanksgiving of sorts this year I'll be a little melancholy, but I'll also remember that despite the challenges of this particular Thanksgiving, I have so much to be thankful for. A God who is with me, people around me who love me, a parish full of incredible people, and all of these blessings will help me not just make it through this Covid period we are in, but a God and people who will help me to make it to heaven, for such is the power of love.

Have a blessed Thanksgiving, and remember today is about much more than the perfect turkey, but about a God who blesses us and the people who do the same. Sometimes we just have to open up our eyes and see past what we don't have, and what we do have.