



The Psalmist says, “God crowns the year with goodness.” Well, we have to ask, with no offense intended against the Almighty or anything, but just after six months into it, did God forget to do so to 2020? Because we have had more, *more* than our fair share of...not-so-goodness already. Even at the start, back in January, there was a plane crash from Ukraine International Airlines heading from Tehran to Kiev, killing all 176 people on board. There were the bushfires that seemed to engulf all of Australia in suffocating flames. There was that soldier in Thailand who went on a shooting rampage in a shopping mall, leaving over 20 dead. Racial tensions continue, not to mention a global pandemic because of the coronavirus. We’re only about six months in: so, we have to ask, did God completely forget to crown this year with any goodness whatsoever?

However, the imagery around that particular verse in Psalm 65 is not a royal palace or some distant heavenly throne, where we could very well understand some kind of crowning ceremony enacted for our good measure every year. Instead, the surrounding scenery is immersed in the Creation: all this abundant water, all this infinite grain cloaking the valleys, all these vast fields thoroughly rich for grazing; all this incredibly rich goodness surrounding us that we so often take for granted, including even this year. Somehow, in God’s eyes, that beauty is more than a sufficient crowning for the entire earth.

Now, we’ll go along with God’s emphasis on the Creation feeding us and, hopefully, to better supply those in need throughout the world, but what good can it really do beyond that for the betterment of society? It so happens that one of the stories that broke as we neared the half-way point of our perceived not-so-great 2020 came from a place that’s been in operation for almost 25 years now. It is an organization called Summit Achievement in Stow, Maine, just east of the border with New Hampshire.

And I bring this place up, because part of what has been going on in the background of this not overly pleasant year is the increased level of anxiety and depression for so many in the world dealing with crippling mental health realities. It has been part of our human landscape longer than we can ever realize, but when we add in the loss of normalcy, the loss of jobs, the all-around fear of the unknown, the already difficult anxiety levels are only going to get severely worse, and that includes for our younger generation, as well.

After all, it is reported that for those ages 3-17 in our country alone, nearly 4.5 million have been diagnosed with some form of anxiety; two million with depression. For some, medication does the trick. For others, routine visits to doctors’ offices suits them just fine. And then there’s this place in Maine that specializes in wilderness therapy, because the studies overwhelmingly show that time spent in nature is beneficial to our mental health, especially for young people. Granted, some of them dread leaving their home, their very home where they are still withdrawn from their own family, where some will only leave their bedroom just to get food, not because they’re being difficult with their parents, but because their level of agonizing depression has fully taken over their life, their identity with the rest of the outside world.

Nevertheless, what Summit provides is a time and place for these young people to face fears alongside others dealing with similar issues at school and home. For six to eight weeks, they will be surrounded by an endless sky and all-around breath-taking nature. For a few days a week, they’ll stay in dorms, working in the classroom setting together, but every Thursday they go on an expedition with a 40 lb. backpack, sleeping outside that night, finding their own new coping mechanisms. All the while, they develop a connection with their respective therapist, who eats with them, goes on the hikes with them. Soon enough, they reach an actual summit of a mountain, feeling a sense of personal empowerment they never knew they had within them, and witnessing their own resilience to face their challenges head-on. In a way, the Creation helps them realize they were, actually, already crowned with the goodness inside of them; they just needed a different kind of help to find it.

And yes, we come today with our fair share of frustrations over the past six months of this perceived not-so-goodness-filled 2020; and the Creation will play a role in giving us a different, holy kind, of help that we desperately crave: not just with ingredients of wheat into a wafer or fruits into a cup of wine. Instead, with God, the sacramental ingredients are compassion, beauty, hope, love, faith, and yes, a Resurrection-equivalent of Holy Spirit-induced resilience. It's not that we are about to be crowned with the goodness we've been absolutely craving for months since the last time we celebrated Communion. It's about God entering into us even more deeply to help us see the goodness that was there all along, within us, and yes, somehow, someway, in this very world that God crowned with all the goodness needed from the cross and out of the tomb. All the eternal goodness that can never be taken away from us, from the whole world that God, beyond all our understanding, still most certainly loves. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!