Good morning, everyone. Happy Thanksgiving! Thanks for making the effort to be here, especially those of you who like to sleep in on holidays! So; our first reading is a story I imagine is familiar for most of us: Daniel in the Lions’ Den. Interestingly, it’s not one of our usual Thanksgiving Day readings, but it is the reading for this Thursday in our Church year. And since we rarely get to hear this story at Mass, I couldn’t resist. Besides, it confirms with Scriptural authority something that all of us dog lovers have known forever, but of which our cat owner friends continue to live in denial; I’m speaking, of course, of the fact that if your cat were bigger, it would eat you. It’s true. I looked it up. Mr. Google says that when your cat rubs against you, it’s not being affectionate. It’s just marking its property!

The Book of Daniel is maybe best known for its striking, apocalyptic prophecies: angels and beasts and horns and fearful visions. It’s fun! And a little scary. But you know, at its heart, it’s really a story full of wonder and gratitude for the faithful, powerful, and mysterious presence of God in our lives, even in the midst of crisis or catastrophe. Daniel is a young Jewish man forced into exile in Babylon, a slave who rises to power in the court of King Darius. As you would guess, this makes him lots of enemies.

But he’s also a young man who, to paraphrase Fr. Dave, knows from Whom he comes, to Whom he belongs, and Who is his destiny. And this gives him a tremendous amount of freedom and faithfulness, even in rather harrowing
circumstances. Over and over again, Daniel’s enemies go after him, placing him in impossible circumstances, beyond even the power of the king to rescue him. Inevitably, he’s offered a way out, if only he’ll compromise his faith. And yet over and over again, Daniel chooses God, he chooses to trust God, he leaves room for God to work, and God responds. Just when it looks like things are out of control, the story reminds us that behind the scenes is a God who’s very much in control; a God whose authority is unchallenged, and whose plan encompasses not just the destiny of nations, but also the smallest details of our lives.

It’s natural and easy to go along when pleasant situations arise in our lives without our choosing them. Daniel reminds us that if we would truly be children of our Father in Heaven, and if we would be truly free, then we also need to learn to accept even those things we would never choose: our personal limitations and weaknesses; sickness and age; situations that life imposes on us; difficult people. Those are all out of our control, but not out of God’s control, and so often it’s the situations beyond our control that God can use to really make us grow. In fact, Fr. Jacques Philippe says,

*By accepting the sufferings offered by life and allowed by God for our progress and purification, we spare ourselves much harder ones. We need to develop this kind of realism and, once and for all, stop dreaming of a life without suffering or conflict. That is the life of heaven, not earth. We must take up our cross and follow Jesus courageously every day; the bitterness of that cross will sooner or later be transformed into sweetness.*
My friends, our holiday today is an opportunity to thank God for all the good things He provides for us: faith, family and friends, material blessings, freedoms. And it’s important that we do that! But here’s a challenge for those of you who might be a bit more daring; today when you’re sitting around your Thanksgiving table or wherever it is that you give thanks to God, at least in your heart, **dare – DARE** - to say thank you to God for one of the difficult things He’s allowed into your life, and for whatever growth or grace may have come from that. I don’t mean to be glib. Loss; disappointment; powerlessness; failure; mortality – I know them in my own life, too, and they’re not easy to carry. But God’s vision is deeper than ours, and He has plans for us that go far beyond the boundaries of this brief mortal life. So trust Him, my friends, even with the difficult parts of your life. Expect His help and be grateful. “The measure of Divine Providence acting on us is the degree of confidence that we have in it,” says St. Francis de Sales. Or more succinctly, in the words of St. John of the Cross, “God gives in the measure that we expect of Him.” Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!