

Thanksgiving – C (19)

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalms 100

Philippians 4:4-9

As you might expect, there is a lot of talk about thanksgiving right about now and a lot of preparations. This is not a new thing; the concept of thanksgiving has been around for a long time. It is mentioned in the Bible in the Book of Leviticus 7:12. Our entire passage from Deuteronomy 26 today is about thanksgiving. What do modern people think of Thanksgiving; what words or images come to mind?

Thanksgiving Day in the U.S. is a national holiday, a celebration of “our land and county.” It’s not a church holiday, but I think we need to consider how the two coincide: no separation of Church and state here.

Thanksgiving Day is hard to preach or maybe it’s easy to preach. Everyone knows we should be thankful. I could say, “Folks, we ought to be thankful” and then sit down.” But then what? There’s little disagreement about thanksgiving. Maybe that could be the whole sermon today: “Folks, we ought to be thankful” and move on. Thanksgiving is like Christmas or Easter. People already know the stories. So what more is there to say?

But we have these wonderful Bible readings today: from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, from Psalm 100 and from Deuteronomy that can flesh out for us the whole idea of giving thanks. In his Letter, Paul urges thanksgiving, even when you ask for something. But thanksgiving does not always come easy. We sometimes forget to give thanks. We sometimes don’t even notice when we are given a gift.

English author Aldous Huxley had it right: “Most human beings have an almost infinite capacity for taking things for granted.” And devotional writer Kent Crockett offers a healthy note of humility: “God has given us far more blessings than we’ve ever thanked him for” (Once Was Blind But Now I Squint, pp. 166-167). We sometimes focus more on the negatives than on the positives in life.

Gavin de Becker, in his book The Gift of Fear, states that the biggest fears Americans have are being in a car crash, 54 percent, having cancer, 53 percent, inadequate Social Security, 50 percent, not enough money for retirement, 49 percent, food poisoning from meat, 36 percent, or getting Alzheimer’s, 35 percent. Others include pesticides on food, being a victim of individual violence, inability to pay current

debts, exposure to foreign viruses, AIDS, natural disasters, an unsafe or sick building, losing one's job, being in a plane crash, suffering a work-related injury, and a stock market crash. The list could go on and on.

But there is hope for us. This story is told about Richard Leakey, the anthropologist whose family has spent a century searching Africa's Turkana Basin for the origin of *Homo sapiens*. Leakey was once asked "What is distinctive about human beings?" Surprising some, he responded, "The capacity to be generous distinguishes human beings from every other creature." He continued by noting that there are, of course, animals that will be generous with their own offspring. There are even some species that will share with members of their group. No other creature, however, will be generous with strangers.

In our passage from Deuteronomy today, God offers direction about giving and generosity to the Israelites through Moses. "When you have come into the land," says Moses, "you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground," and you shall put it in a basket and take it to the priest as an offering. It is a ritual of remembrance and of gratitude. It is a moment to take stock: to look back, to look within, to look ahead.

The worshiper will then say to the priest, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us" (Deuteronomy 26:3).

This is what all pilgrims want to do: to come into the land. To arrive. To feel that one is getting somewhere. To sense progress. To have the destination in sight.

As we consider the things of the past or guess what might happen in the future, we take time to remember what has changed and what might change. And when we consider years, or decades, or even generations, we may start to think about the things in life that are really worth preserving.

Moses looks ahead with confidence, believing that God will surely lead his people into the Promised Land. And so he asks the Israelites to do several things that might be called marks of the pilgrim.

A pilgrim is grateful for the blessings along the way. A pilgrim gives gifts to express that gratitude.

Another mark of the pilgrim journey is the story itself. After presenting the first fruits, the worshiper is to tell a little story, and it is in this story that he leaps back many years to the greatest crisis in the history of

God's people. He jumps back years, decades, generations, and he tells the tale, "My ancestor Jacob was a wandering Aramean who went to live as a foreigner in Egypt. His family arrived few in number, but in Egypt they became a large and mighty nation." (v. 5). It is in this story that the people of God discover the things in life that are really worth preserving, whether the year is 1979, 2019 or 2039.

"When the Egyptians oppressed and humiliated us, Moses remembers, "by making us their slaves, we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors. He heard our cries and saw our hardship, toil, and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and powerful arm, with overwhelming terror, and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey!" (vv. 6-9).

God, hearing His people's cry for help and then rescuing them, reminds me of the story of Samuel who set up a standing stone at a battle site, and named the stone, "Ebenezer." The word, "Ebenezer," means, "stone of help," or "thus far the Lord has helped us." It was a way of remembering a moment in time when God had blest the Israelites. That name, "Ebenezer," appears in one of my favorite hymns: "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing", No. 400 in our United Methodist Hymnal, and is, for me, a reminder to raise a virtual "Ebenezer" to acknowledge all the times and in all the circumstances of how and when God has blest me. We each have those moments and have the opportunity to "raise our own 'Ebenezer'" whenever we are blest – to tell the story of how God has blest us.

So what is your story? What are some of the moments of your faith journey as you look back over the years and acknowledge the God moments in your life? I invite you to take a piece of paper, write down 3 of those moments and place it in the offering plate as your thanksgiving to God. Write down those moments in the past year when you have experienced gifts, blessings, or surprises.

Moses offers one more mark of a pilgrim on a faith journey: "Place the produce before the LORD your God, and bow to the ground in worship before him" (Deut. 26:10). A pilgrim bends to the will of God. A pilgrim acknowledges the goodness of God, and worships God.

Pilgrim marks: gratitude, story-telling and bowing before God.

We cannot know the future, but we can trust that God will always

bless us. Thomas Merton offered a prayer for all pilgrims on a faith journey: *"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadows of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."*

Thanksgiving Day is a day to remember and express thanks. The most poetic expressions of gratitude in the Bible come to us in the Psalms. Some, like Psalm 100 which we prayed today, are songs of pure exuberance. It is the kind of psalm you might belt out in those joyous times when you can almost touch God and giving thanks is as automatic as breathing. The psalmist today invites us into the sheer joy of experiencing the God-shaped hole within us as it is filled to overflowing.

In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again, I will say rejoice." Why? Because the Lord is near.

We may wonder what's going on and try to figure out what's going on in our lives; we may wonder just what, exactly, God intends for us. Our lives can seem to be made up of some pretty ordinary material. And sometimes life can feel pretty shabby, with the best and worst seeming to live side by side. What's more, we live with interrupted plans, failed dreams, less-than-ideal family or economic circumstances. These are the context in which we live, so rejoice always?

The living out of our lives is no Hallmark made-for-television movie, yet in retrospect we can often begin to see the hand of God. To rejoice in the middle of it all, before we have this hindsight advantage, is an act of faith – believing that, even when it doesn't feel like it at all, God is near and already at work, sprinkling blessings and gifts indiscriminately.

God is at work even when circumstances feel like they're out of control, God is near. Even when families behave like families sometimes do, God is near. Even when we feel alone, God is near. So rejoice, and give thanks this Thanksgiving and always.