

November 27, 2019

Thanksgiving Eve/Year C

Primary Text: John 6:25-35

Philippians 4:4-9

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Sermon Title: "Think About THESE Things"

Theme

Every gathering for worship has elements of thanksgiving. When we are nourished with God's bounty in holy communion, when we partake of Jesus' word that gives life to the world, and even when two or three of us simply join our hearts in prayer to make our requests known to God, we do so "with thanksgiving." Let us give thanks to the Lord, who is good and whose mercy endures forever.

Text

¹When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ²you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "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." ⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹Then you, together

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with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Sermon

I was moved to preach on the First Reading primarily, because it is a story about thanking God for God's providence. And a little context will help us understand what is going on in the passage from Deuteronomy, and a few pictures will also help to illustrate.

1 Referring to the story of the Exodus, you may recall that after a show of God's great power, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt.

2 But then Pharaoh had a change of mind and sent his army after them. The Israelites found themselves stuck between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea, when God came to the rescue again.

3 This time God caused the Red Sea to wall up on either side exposing a path so that the Israelites could traverse the sea on dry land.

4 After they had safely crossed the sea, the waters crashed in on the Egyptians destroying Pharaoh's army.

5 But after that miraculous demonstration of God's power, once in the desert the Israelites started complaining, first about water, then about food, then about the lack of variety of food. And each time God responded by reminding them that he had not forgotten them. They needed to trust God to provide for them, and then provided what they needed.

6 Then God called Moses up to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments and a whole host of other statutes, ordinances, decrees, and laws. While Moses was up on the mountain top communing with God, from the ground below, the Israelites saw thunder, lightning and thick clouds and they concluded that poor Moses, their leader was toast.

7 Now if I would have seen this kind of terrible overwhelming demonstration of God's power, I would like to think I would fall prostrate on the ground in fear, but that is not what the Israelites did. Instead, presuming their leader Moses has gone up in smoke, they gathered all their gold, formed it into an idol in the shape of a golden calf and began to worship it and make sacrifice to it.

8 So there they were, at the bottom of the mountain, cavorting and worshipping and making sacrifice to this idol, this creation of their own hands, when God noticed, and became enraged, and was about to consume them with his fury and would have if Moses hadn't intervened.

Moses went down the mountain with the two tablets upon which God had written the Ten Commandments and upon seeing the bad behavior of his people, in rage threw the tablets at the people and smashed them.

And then in one of my favorite verses of the Old Testament:

²⁰He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

Hmm, I wonder how that ended up?

Theme Slide

The people repented, and God made another set of tablets, and sent the Israelites to the Promised Land, the land God had promised to their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph. When they got there, they sent twelve spies into the land that was occupied by other pagan tribes. When they returned forty days later, two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, reported that the land was indeed flowing with milk and honey. However the other ten reported giant warriors occupied the land and they had no confidence that they could defeat them, and that report won the day.

This lack of faith once again infuriated the LORD and so he decreed that no man over the age of twenty, except the two faithful ones, Joshua and Caleb, would ever enter the Promised Land that God commanded them occupy. Instead, they would wander in the desert until all of them died. That wondering would last forty years.

Deuteronomy is the book of the Old Testament that stands as a reminder to the Israelites of their own faithlessness and disobedience. In chapter 26 of Deuteronomy, we have Moses' instructions of what the Israelites are supposed to do after they finally possess the land that God had promised their ancestors hundreds of years before, that they could have had all along, had they just trusted in the LORD.

It was several minutes ago that we read the First Reading from Deuteronomy 26. I hope you remember it, because remembering is at the core of the reading. On his deathbed, Moses, who by the way was one of the men who would never enter the Promised Land, gave this speech to the Israelites on the advent of their finally crossing the Jordan to take possession of the land. Moses asked the Israelites to remember what God has done for them, in spite of their faithlessness and disobedience. Moses ritualized this remembrance with a thank offering. In verse ten Moses dictated what they are to say and do. They are to say,

¹⁰"So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

We could get into the details of this but the details are not the point. God wanted the Israelites to acknowledge the bounty that God alone had provided. And in bringing "the first of the fruit" they were demonstrating their trust in God to supply the rest of their need. This is the basis for the biblical concept of the tithe. So when we tithe first, a full ten-percent before taxes of our gross earnings before we take care of our other bills, it is a demonstration of our trust in God that God will provide for all our needs. And while that might sound like a stewardship message, it is not. As I said, it is an opportunity to demonstrate our trust in God that God will supply our needs.

Back to the First Reading, "But Pastor, that is all Old Testament stuff. How does it apply to us?" I am so glad you asked.

It applies to us directly. God still demands our faithfulness and obedience. And God still blesses and provides for us, though God's blessings and providence are no longer withheld because of our faithlessness and disobedience – and aren't we glad of that! Out of God's great love for us, his creation, God brought love, grace, and mercy in the form of Jesus Christ his own Son to our hopeless situation. And through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ, God's righteous anger at our faithlessness and disobedience is satisfied – then, now, and forever. God is satisfied – not by anything we have done, but by what Jesus Christ has done on our behalf.

Like our ancient ancestors, the Israelites, we follow Moses' advice and take time to remember, and give thanks. Even the feasting on God's bounty is scriptural.

9 Our more recent ancestors, the Pilgrims of Plymouth Massachusetts were so thankful to have simply survived, and more than simply survived, had had a successful enough growing season and harvest that they took time in late fall of 1621 to give thanks to God – and the American Thanksgiving tradition began.

How can we give thanks for receiving the love, grace, and mercy of God in all the ways we receive it? How do we thank God for having been given the biggest and most generous gift of all, the opportunity to have eternal life, and for all the smaller life-sustaining gifts like meaningful employment, family and friends, enough to prosper our lives?

The apostle Paul wrote in the Second Reading from Philipians that we should think about, and not just think about, but also do,

⁸whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing these things

The most valuable offering we can offer to God is the sacrifice of our faithlessness and disobedience and in its place commit to live godly lives according to the example of Jesus Christ God's Son and our Lord. This is the thanks God wants from us.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen