

MESSAGE: “Remember to Give Thanks”

Text: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to offer thanksgiving to God for blessings in our lives, church and nation.

“When do we give thanks?” In 1939, that was a pressing question on the minds of many Americans. The Great Depression, starkly captured by John Steinbeck’s classic, *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, was nearing its end, yet Hitler’s unrelenting march on Europe eclipsed the relief. United States neutrality in the European war was declared in September of that year, but Roosevelt followed it three days later by declaring a state of national emergency.

The New York World’s Fair opened in April with cutting-edge technology, but in August Einstein notified Roosevelt of an atomic bomb option that was suddenly available. Hollywood enjoyed a golden year with the release of *Wuthering Heights*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*, yet vividly recalled the dark-side of media power by observing the year anniversary of Orson Welles’ radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*. Yet none of these was the instigator of the question, “When do we give thanks?,” that occupied the minds of the American public in November of 1939.

The question was prompted by a controversial declaration by President Roosevelt. By executive decision, he moved the Thanksgiving holiday forward seven days to accommodate a longer Christmas selling season, an extra week of Black Friday, if you will. Tradition and commerce locked horns in battle, and no one knew when to give thanks.

The historical quandary illustrates a paradox of thanksgiving which hearkens back to ancient times and ricochets forward to our own generation. When do we give thanks? Listen again to the first verse of our text from Deuteronomy, “When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess...you shall take some of the first of all the fruit...and present it to God.” The command was simple. The Israelites were to offer tangible thanksgiving to God when they received their promised blessings. The first-fruits of Canaan would be sacred to God.

Moses gave the command as the people camped on the wilderness side of the Jordan River. Forty years before, their parents teetered on the brink of possibility, yet fear prevented them from entering the land of promise. Majority rule overwhelmed faith in God’s promises, and thanksgiving for a land flowing with milk and honey was delayed an entire generation.

Moses is now an old man, preaching his final words of guidance to a generation reaching for a dream. He, himself, will not be with them when they enter the land and offer thanksgiving with their first-fruit offerings, but he anticipates it with certainty. His heart overflows with hope as a cornucopia spills nuts and fruit from a harvest. He does not say, “If you enter the land...”, he says, “When you enter the land, give thanks.”

The command extends to us as well. Centuries later, the Apostle Paul would echo Moses’ words in a letter to the Church of Thessalonica, “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God concerning you.” (I Thessalonians 5:18) Like the ancient Hebrews, we, too are called to offer tangible thanksgiving to God for blessings seen and unseen.

The command is clear, our interpretation less so, and our response too often altogether absent. The problem is this: how do we know when we have entered the land of God’s blessing? How do we know when to give thanks? How do we know which day is Thanksgiving Day? We may be willing to give our first-fruits (I trust that we are), but how do we know when the blessings have come? We are caught in a wilderness between Egypt and Canaan, trouble and celebration. In our confusion, we put thanksgiving on hold. The turkey has been roasted and placed on the table, but no one cuts into it lest the overall effect be spoiled.

We would thank God for healing, but the big toe on our left foot still hurts. We would thank God for providing our needs, but we are a month behind on the electric bill. We would thank God for forgiveness, but we haven’t forgiven the person who crossed us. We would thank God for the gift of family, but that reminds us of Susan who isn’t with us anymore. If we search hard enough, we can always find a reason to defer thanksgiving.

When I was a child and youth, I did not struggle with this quite as much. In those days, I participated in the seasonal experience of planting seed, cultivating a garden’s growth and harvesting the potatoes, squash, pumpkins and corn. At Thanksgiving time, I could go down to the cellar, open the freezers and see the bags of frozen peas, green beans and corn. I could count the jars on the shelf of canned tomatoes, relish and pickles. I could open the lid of the bin filled with hundreds of potatoes. I could walk out back and stare at the endless tiers of wood that would supply our winter heat.

After high school graduation, I began to lose my way on the annual pilgrimage to thanksgiving. For nine years of higher education, thanksgiving coincided with term papers and final exams. Then I was busy with marriage, parenting, ordination and pasturing two churches. At no point was the parish free from some form of grief, but neither was it ever bereft of celebration. I needed to learn to thank God in the midst of all circumstances because God is good even when circumstances are not.

When was the last time you celebrated Thanksgiving Day? Do not say, “a year ago” unless you truly celebrated it a year ago. Consuming large quantities of comestibles has nothing whatsoever to do with what I am talking about. I am talking about consuming large quantities of hope, love and gratitude. These are the staples of a true thanksgiving. Hope is the harvest we celebrate, for it gives us the capacity to affirm that life is good even when we feel it is not. Love is the feast we offer, for it nourishes every spirit which tastes it. Gratitude is the flavor of peace, for it praises the Giver of abundant life.

As hope is the harvest of approaching miracle, gratitude is the fruit of acknowledged blessing. When our eyes open to God’s grace, we feel loved and are able to love. Circumstances are never wholly bad, any more than they are ever wholly good. If we let them pull focus, we find ourselves back in the desert of ‘what if.’

When do we give thanks? Our final hymn spells it out for us: “NOW thank we all our God, with heart and hand and voices...” We thank God NOW, for we can trace God’s grace through the days of a year that is past. We thank God now, for we have abilities, relationships and resources that are gifts from God’s own heart. We thank God now, for our future holds the promise of character, adventure, discovery and life eternal. We thank God now, for today is Thanksgiving Day, regardless of calendar, windfall or executive order.

Do not worry about whether you have received your promised land or not, and do not despair if you feel like your promised land has gone to seed. The destination is less important than the journey, and all of us, without exception, continue on that journey. Have you ever sung that crowd-pleasing song of thanksgiving, “Over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s house we go?” It celebrates the journey, not the destination. Let’s close with prayer, “Thank you God for the journey, and thank you God for walking beside us—through shadow and sunlight. Amen.”

Happy Thanksgiving my friends!