

Thanksgiving Day, 2009 Deuteronomy 8:7-20

It's Thanksgiving. A recession grips the nation, unemployment has climbed to record levels, our homes and our savings have lost significant value, families are wondering how they'll pay the bills, a flu virus ravages the globe, government deficit spending threatens to bankrupt the nation or send taxes through the roof, we're engaged in two wars overseas, an act of terror has struck on our own shores once again, and in the past year some of us have laid loved ones to their final rest. And it's thanksgiving – for what?

Perhaps a little historical perspective is in order. It's the fall of 1621 in Plymouth Colony. A small group of settlers in Massachusetts called for "a day of rejoicing" after their first planting had produced an adequate harvest. That spring on the advice from the local Iroquois tribe they planted 20 acres of corn and 6 of barley and peas. The corn crop was good. The barley fair, but the peas had not been worth gathering. But they had survived the first year in the New World, and in the spirit of thanksgiving, they invited Chief Massasoit, to a feast of thanks. He showed up with 90 braves and five deer. The feast lasted three days.

They too could have sputtered, Thanksgiving – for what? Of the 101 Pilgrims who set sail for the New World a year prior, only half had survived the winter. They landed November 11th, and by the time they made shelter for the winter, exhaustion, exposure, inadequate diet, heavy colds, bronchial infections, racking coughs, scurvy, and other diseases began to claim victims. Death made no distinctions. It took children and adults. Of the original 18 married couples in the group, only 3 pairs survived. Bradford, the colony's leader, was a widower. Susanna White, whose second son had been born on the Mayflower, was now a widow. But it was thanksgiving. With faith in the one true God, confident He would bless their quest for freedom to worship the Lord according to the Scriptures, that small band of Christian people took time away from their toil for "a day of rejoicing."

By comparison with the Pilgrims, we're blessed beyond measure. Yet I often complain. And when I'm not complaining, I'm worrying. How about you? Have you ever wondered, "Why is it that people become less thankful as their blessings increase?" We thank God for the comfort, but do we forget to thank Him for the cross? Do we thank God for the roses, but not for the thorns? Do we understand that our tears form a spiritual rainbow, for God has promised even in a world of hurt and suffering, to mature our faith and work it all out for a blessing?

So today, as we look at our comforts and our crosses, we join with God's people of old to say, **"Praise the Lord Your God!" Look at His blessings. Offer Him your thanks.**

Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel, didn't deserve God's blessings. He in grace gave them His truth and promised the Savior of the world would come through them. He gave them a special land where He would keep them safe as He prepared to send His Son into the world. After rescuing them from Egypt and leading them through the burning desert, the Lord through Moses gave them this preview of the land they were about to enter: **"The Lord your God is bringing you to a good land, a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills, a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey, a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing...When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land He has given you!"**

Yet I wonder if even that land could compare with another blessed land, the land you and I call home. Where in history has there been a country so richly blessed as ours? If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead, and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of this world. If you have money in the bank, in your wallet or purse, and spare change in a dish someplace, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy. If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of

torture, or the pangs of starvation, you are ahead of 500 million people in the world. If you can attend a church service without fear of harassment, arrest, torture, or death, you enjoy a freedom that three billion people in the world lack.

And our greatest gifts from God are not earthly riches, but redemption through Jesus' blood; not food for the body, but food for the soul through the Gospel; not safety from earthly enemies, but a Savior from sin, death, and hell. Yes, the Lord has so richly blessed and preserved among us the purity of His Gospel and the free opportunity to read, hear, learn, and rejoice together in it!

Do we take these blessings for granted? God has given our synod almost 160 years of grace in proclaiming the true Gospel. He preserves our congregation today, a haven for the weary soul seeking to rest in Jesus as the Holy Spirit applies the forgiveness of sins to our hearts through the gospel we hear in absolution, in the lessons, in the sermon, in the body and blood of Christ. We are blessed to know the same Gospel truth Jesus handed down to His apostles and His Spirit inspired in their writing! He has given us a house of worship where we gather to pray and praise and from which we go, strengthened to serve and witness. He has entrusted us with the privilege of a Lutheran School, where daily our children hear their Savior's voice, kept safe from spiritual foes by the Word of God applied in every class. Praise God as you look at His blessings!

Ah, but what happened to the people of Israel? Moses forewarned, **"Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe His laws and His decrees that I am giving you this day...then your heart will become proud...You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' If you ever forget the Lord your God, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed."** But they must have forgotten – to tell their children of the only true Savior. They must have merely gone through the motions in their worship, putting in a little time at God's house and then busily engaging in their own business and life. Their kings and priests must have forgotten to humble themselves before the Lord and guide His people by His holy Word. And they tragically did forget as a nation; and God justly did judge them, allowing their enemies to destroy them 800 years later. Oh, the Lord preserved His Church among them, that little remnant of believers. But they too suffered as their nation endured war and their cities were besieged. They too endured famine and captivity. But even then, the Lord kept their faith alive through His promises – and in the fullness of time sent His Son.

Is Israel's history repeating itself in our country today? How many people in our nation even bother to bow their heads and give thanks at meal time? On a national Day of Thanksgiving, how many will actually gather in Christian houses of worship to thank the only true Savior, Jesus Christ? How many use their freedom to pursue pleasure rather than peace with God through Jesus? How many have abandoned trust in God for trust in some human theory or human power? How many assume their own skill, cunning, and sweat acquired their wealth and power? How many turn inward in celebrating human pride rather than outward in humble thanks? ***Israel's example demonstrates that in prosperity people tend to forget God.*** The child who gets anything he wants is what we used to call, "spoiled." He fails to appreciate what he receives and whines when he doesn't get more. Are we as a nation acting more and more like immature, spoiled children? Are we so caught up with getting what we want for our lives, we've forgotten what God wants?

We won't forget the Lord when we look at His blessings – and offer Him our thanks. To appreciate what He has done to save us, let me close with a personal Thanksgiving story.

On my return flight from a trip to visit our children in Canada for Canadian Thanksgiving in October, the plane landed in Milwaukee at night. As the plane taxied to the terminal, a voice came on the intercom, "Please remain seated in honor of a fallen soldier as the military escort exits the plane. Two soldiers stood up, and the rest of the passengers applauded respectfully, albeit mildly. The men in uniform exited, the lights came on, and everyone started the search for their carry-on luggage. They were busy, after all – and had people to meet

and places to go. I sat back however, staring out the window. (I always like a window seat when flying). I wanted to shout, "Please sit back down and look out the right side of the plane. Don't you know what is happening?" I was mesmerized by the sight. The soldiers stood at attention, saluting the flag-draped coffin as it was wheeled from the belly of the plane. Standing off to the side in the shadows next to a black limousine stood what I assume was the family, silently watching in solemn grief. What a sacrifice, I thought, that soldier and that family has made that I can still live free.

What a sacrifice that we might *all* be free. What a sacrifice – the Father gave His Son into the battle, knowing what it would cost; the Son willingly climbed that hill outside Jerusalem; the heavenly Father silently stood by as His Son died in hellish pain, suffering for the sins of the world; the Holy Spirit, entered the battle in our rebel hearts, and in holy baptism gave us a new heart, a living heart, a heart that believes Jesus died and rose that we might live free! Here is real freedom, for which Christians thank God in free lands and in persecuted places – freedom from guilt freedom from sin's curse, freedom from Satan's dominion and his lies, freedom from hell, freedom to live eternally in heaven, and freedom now to live joyful, hope-filled lives in God's kingdom!

But folks are busy. They've got people to meet and places to go. They forget God's sacrifice. They forget to give thanks. But for you and me, for all who truly believe, Thanksgiving is not a polite applause to God one day a year, (Atta boy, God, keep up the good work! But now, I've got to go on to more important things...) No, Thanksgiving us a life of faith, love, and thankful, obedient service in loyalty to the Son of God our Hero, our Savior! Look at your blessings! How will you offer your praise?