

Written Copy: Deuteronomy 8:2-3 “Thanksgiving Reimagined”

Thanksgiving

Thursday, November 26th, 2020

Text: Deuteronomy 8:2-3

²And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. ³And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

Exegetical Statement

As the nation of Israel stands on the verge of entering the Promised Land Moses is preaching his farewell sermon to them. He is reviewing all the laws, commands, and statutes that God gave them from Mt. Sinai and to which they agreed to obey as their part of the Covenant they made with Him. He calls them to remember how they did not wander 40 years in the wilderness on their own, but He led them and cared for them the whole way. He allowed them to encounter various trials in order to humble them and turn them back in total dependence upon Him. He tested them so that they might understand what was in their hearts regarding the keeping of His commandments, their inability to do so, and therefore bring them to repentance. He allowed them to hunger and then provided the manna so that they might know life is not just about the food they have in their hands but the promise of God's Word to bring and sustain life. He kept their clothes and sandals from wearing out and thereby sustained them throughout their journey. He disciplined them out of the same love a father has for his children, so that in this new land of plenty they would continue to love and fear Him. For it is a good land with an abundance of clean water, crops to make bread, vines to make wine, olive oil for cooking and burning in lamps, and honey for sweetening all things. The ground will provide iron and bronze for tools and weapons. They shall eat and be satisfied to the full. Therefore, they should respond not by forgetting their God in the midst of their plenty, but blessing, praising, and thanking Him for keeping His promises and for these gracious undeserved gifts.

Focus Statement:

Just as He called Israel to do, the LORD calls us to look back on all His gracious gifts and His guiding and providing presence in our lives. He reminds us that we celebrate while still in the wilderness of this fallen world, yet even here we have received great blessings. And the greatest of these is the gift of His Son, and the faith that brings to us a personal relationship with Him: life now and eternal life to come. And he invites us to look forward to the Messianic banquet that will make all Thanksgiving Dinners pale in comparison. And to help us look forward provides for us the Foretaste of the Feast to Come that is the Lord's Supper

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We face a very different Thanksgiving than in previous years. Instead of a meal filled with joy and thanks it is filled with fear. We will either gather with family with the threat of infection hanging over our heads or will be eating alone. We miss those who are no longer with us to celebrate and that makes this a hard time for many. We long for the celebrations of the past.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Focus not on what is lacking this Thanksgiving, but as Paul suggest all that we have in Christ that is true, honorable, in right standing with God, free from the defilement of sin, worthy to be prized and praised, and morally excellent. Focus on His presence and His gifts given in Word and Sacrament that pour His love and peace into our hearts in the worst of circumstances

Subject Sentence: Focusing on God's gracious gifts creates thankfulness

Introduction: Symbolic Pictures of Thanksgiving

When you think of the traditional Thanksgiving Dinner what image comes to mind? I think for many it would be Norman Rockwell's painting "Freedom from Want" published in 1943 in the Saturday Evening Post. It epitomizes what we want our Thanksgiving celebration to be: family and loved ones gathered around a well set table, full of good foods, all with smiles on their faces, and of course the huge turkey done to perfection. And no one coughing, hacking, or sneezing. No one with face flush from running a temperature.

So, what will the image of 2020's Thanksgiving celebration be for us? What kind of pictures can encapsulate our spirit when, instead of just friends and family joining us, there could also be COVID-19 coming to dinner? Is there a spirit of disappointment, dysfunction, and sadness for you that is better encapsulated by these pictures of a Thanksgiving Dinner ruined (*show pictures of burnt turkey, dish on fire in the oven, overflowing bread dish, and casserole broken on the floor*)? Or perhaps this one: instead of Thanksgiving Dinner with family, it's Thanksgiving Dinner alone (*picture of man eating dinner alone*).

Perhaps this year you will choose to gather with a limited number of family and friends. Perhaps it will be just you and your immediate family, even if that mean just two of you, or you by yourself. Whatever your plans I think most of us are looking back a bit sadly on what we enjoyed Thanksgiving past, when COVID-19 wasn't even a blip on the radar.

Now you and I know that as Christians we are supposed to be thankful. And perhaps if I asked each one of you what you were thankful for, you could rattle off a list of things. These would be things that exist in your head. But what about your heart? At this time of year, with all that has happened, does your thankfulness reach all the way down there? Or is that thankfulness blocked by the fear of COVID, or some other trials and suffering that you've experienced this past year?

Learning From Moses Sermon to OT Church

In our Old Testament Lesson this evening the LORD wants to refocus our view of things right now. You could say He wants to give us "Thanksgiving Reimagined".

But why do we need our focus changed and our holiday reimagined? Because as the New Testament Church, we are not that much different than Israel in Deuteronomy. We are His chosen people just as they were; chosen not because we are better, or more faithful, or more loving than anyone else. We are chosen, just as they were, because of His great love for us. They are standing on the threshold of entering the Promised Land. And we are standing on the threshold of entering the Promised Land of Eternal Life as we await the return of our Savior and Lord at any time. Moses in this farewell sermon invites Israel to look forward to what lies ahead, as well as back on where they have been.

But, just like Israel, we can look back through the distorted tinted lens of sentimental nostalgia that makes the days gone by better than what they really were. Lenses that emphasize the dysfunction of today. When Israel was eating manna in their wilderness wanderings day after day, and had grown tired of it, they looked back at their days of

captivity in Egypt, seeing them as having an endless supply of pots of meat and fresh vegetables. These distorted lenses blocked true vision of the backbreaking labor, day in and day out that was there real lot. We too overlook the unpleasant memories that would otherwise make the “good old days” seem not so good, and in comparison, these days not quite so awful.

On the other hand, we can look back at this past year through the distorted tinted lens of COVID-19 depression. The fear of the virus, the knowledge of loved ones and friends who have contracted it, and some who have succumbed to it, all these can provide a negative picture to our minds eye that numbs any thankfulness we may begin to feel. We feel trapped, not knowing what to do. Do we hide in fear? Or do we roll the dice, invite loved ones, and pray the Virus doesn't come too. And along with the Virus there are other problems that have colored our lives sad and negative: there are businesses closing down, people laid off or fired, cancer and other illnesses, relational problems, the death of loved ones; all these touching our families and those we know and love. These things can make us see 2020 as a year we want to forget. A quote one of my favorite memes, alluding to the plot of the Back to the Future movies where Doc Brown invents a time machine that he and friend Marty use to travel back and forth in time, has Doc Brown warning: “Marty, whatever happens don't go to 2020!”

Israel too often looked around at their situation with a similar kind of distorted tinted lenses, forming an inaccurate mind's eye picture of their life and struggles. They looked around, and then began to believe that the LORD had abandoned them when Moses was on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and nights. So that they made for themselves a golden calf to replace God and His servant Moses who seemingly abandoned them. Another time they doubted the leadership of Moses as being God ordained and instigated an uprising against him and against Aaron. In doing so they forgot of the validating and powerful signs the LORD gave them as the He both began and ended the Egyptian plagues through Moses' command with Aaron as his mouthpiece. They forgot about the parting of the Red Sea as the LORD worked through Moses' lifted up hand to first provide the escape through water, and then closed that escape route to destroy their Egyptian enemies once and for all. They forgot the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that protected them and led them throughout their journey, providing them assurance of the LORD's continued presence, wherever they went. The same presence that had brought them to the entrance to the Promised Land this day.

So, the LORD, through Moses sermon, works to remove these distorted lenses from the people's eyes, and show them their past through the LORD's eyes. **Deuteronomy 8:2** “**And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.**” In all that they suffered and endured, not once had the LORD left them to suffer on their own, or wander

on their own. In all the hardship they suffered and encountered there was a purpose that served God's will and plan for them. The purpose was to humble them and test them so that they might be able to see in their own hearts what the LORD could already see. What they needed to see is the same thing you and I need to see in your heart and mine. Pride, and a sense of entitlement over all that we have or think we should have. That is sin. And it lives in your heart and mine. When life doesn't meet our expectations, we react the same way Israel did. We accuse God of not loving us or caring for us. We accuse Him of abandoning us to suffer on our own. We cry out for relief, but He seems not to answer, at least not according to our timetable. We sometimes even doubt His love. We wonder if we really are His precious children.

The LORD cites one of these times of testing as an example of how it had a greater purpose. **Deuteronomy 8:3** "**And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.**" He let them hunger. And at times lets us hunger, and suffer lack and want, so that we might realize we are not the end all be all of our existence. Nor can we be. We live not by what we can place in our own hands through our money, or hard work. He wants to open our eyes to see that all we have is a gift from Him. And as we look for comfort and strength during these times of testing, we need look no farther than His Word. For you and me, COVID-19 makes us realize that our lives are not in our own hands. We can do much to keep ourselves healthy by diet, exercise, wearing masks, social distancing and avoiding crowds. But in the end, not even these things can totally protect us from COVID. There are many other things that we cannot protect ourselves from, the biggest one being death. We must place our life and death into our LORD's hands. The LORD gave each of us the breath of life. And he knows that day when we will breath our last. We are to hold by faith that day will not come without His approval or knowledge.

The Promise of the Gospel the OT and NT Church Trust in

And what does the Word of the LORD say about that day when you will draw your last breath? The same thing He said to His chosen people of old in **Isaiah 43:1-3** "**¹ But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you.**" In Baptism the same LORD God who formed and created you has called you by name to be His own precious child. He redeemed you out of the grasp of Satan and eternal death and brought you into His kingdom, His family.

What does His Word say about the price He paid to buy you back? **1 Peter 1:18-19** “**18 knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.**” The Father gave something more precious for you than anything on earth, He gave the life of His own Son, who suffered and died on the cross so that His precious blood might pay the price of redemption. A man’s blood shed so that it could redeem you. The blood shed by God Himself, so that it has the power to pay for every single sin of every single human being, including you and me.

His Word promises us that just as the Father raised that Lamb of Sacrifice from death, you may know in your mind and trust in your heart that your last breath on this earth is not the end. That Lamb of Sacrifice, your Savior Jesus Christ, earned for you the resurrection that will be your future on the Last Day. He earned for you a home with Him in Eternal Life. Your own place reserved in the Promised Land to come. All this and more given to you in Your baptism as the LORD called you by name and gave you His name: that of a Christian, making you a part of His family.

The LORD Invites Us To Look at Now and Forward

As Israel sat there on the verge of entering the Promised Land, the LORD invited them not only to look back but to look forward to what was yet to come. **Deuteronomy 8:7-10** **7 For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, 9 a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. 10 And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you.**” They were on the verge of leaving the wilderness behind to enter a land where they would lack nothing. There would be a plentiful supply of food, and not just bland food, but food to delight the tastebuds. There would be no lack of water. There would be cities already built, and vineyards already planted. And there would be an abundance of building materials as their population grew and expanded. So too the LORD wants us to look ahead to the New Heavens and the New Earth, where the land we will inhabit will be the restoration of the Garden of Eden. A paradise that will make Israel’s Promised Land pale by comparison. And all those things that serve to distort our picture of our life with the LORD now, those that make us sad and fearful, they will all be gone. This sure and certain promise that we hold by faith is more than enough reason to bless and thank the LORD with songs of thankfulness and praise.

And yet, how should we see ourselves right now, here approaching the end of 2020? Just as He did with Israel, the LORD invites us to see our lives right now through the lens of faith. **Deuteronomy 8:4-6** “**4 Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years. 5 Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you. 6 So you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him.**” Despite all that has happened this year and all that is currently happening we, like Israel of old, have not lacked in clothing or shoes or any other temporal need. We have truly been blessed in a far greater way than many others who live in other parts of the globe. And we are to know that those times of testing come from the mind of the LORD who loves us as a father loves His own son. We are to know and believe that the LORD disciplines us in order that we might draw closer to Him, because He is always holding on to us, and promises to never let go. We reach out and take hold of Him as we participate in His Sacrament. And for this our hearts are moved to give Him thanks and praise.

Conclusion

There are times when, through the distorted tinted glasses of fear and doubt, we might be tempted to see this Thanksgiving as a dysfunctional mistake. But the LORD this day is opening your eyes to see all the blessing of yesterday, today, and tomorrow that are yours. Even if your Thanksgiving may look to your eyes as being dysfunctional (*show picture of ruined Thanksgiving meals*), or even like this (*picture of man eating alone*), the truth is there is still much to be thankful for. And that you are never alone. In your Baptism you have been given the constant presence of the Spirit of Jesus. And you have been united together with us, your brothers and sisters in Christ. And they are only a phone call away. And that is something that we who have been blessed with family to gather with may wish to remember. We might not be able to visit in person, but we can always make that phone call to those we know who must celebrate alone. Through the gift of His Word and Sacrament this day the LORD is working to open your eyes to see this Thanksgiving, as well as your life not through fear covered glasses of COVID-19, but through His foretaste of the Feast to come. In it we are surrounded by His presence, and His angels, and united with our loved ones. In this Sacrament we are made steadfast in faith as we await that Eternal Banquet, where you and I have a place reserved by our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. May this truth be the fuel for you worship and thanksgiving tonight, tomorrow, and going forward. Amen.