**Grateful for What Is to Come**

**Text: Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

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**November 24, 2019**

On October 3, 1789, President George Washington issued a proclamation calling for a National Day of Thanksgiving on the 4th Thursday of November. He called the nation to acknowledge the role of Providence in guiding us through the Revolution and the creation of the Constitution. He encouraged his fellow citizens to seek God’s forgiveness for “our national…transgressions.” And he asked the people to thank God for the peace, the plenty and the liberty of the land.

But the President was thankful not only for what had come to pass. He also encouraged the nation to be grateful for what was to come. The United States had its whole future ahead of it. Washington had been in office for only 5 months, and the Constitution had been ratified for only 16 months. Lots of good things were going to happen over the next 230 years. And we know that, of course; but Washington had no way of knowing that. Nevertheless, he issued this proclamation, calling the nation to give thanks for what had been and for what was to come. In his thanksgiving proclamation, Washington stated his believe that God is “the…Author of all the good that was, that is, or *that will be*.” So the President looked forward to the “national government” being “a blessing to all the people, by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed…” He anticipated the promotion of “the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue…and the increase of science among…us,” and he called upon the people to seek from God, on behalf of all humanity, “such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.”

For all of these blessings – past, present and yet to come, the nation was called to set aside a day to give thanks to Almighty God.

Now President Washington was not the most orthodox believer. Like many of the Founders, his faith flowed at least as much from the philosophy of the Enlightenment as it did from the wisdom of the scriptures. But he had learned, from Old and New Testament alike, that God is the Giver of all good gifts. And if the Founders believed anything, they believed that the hand of Providence was guiding history in a good and wise direction. So they had reason to be hopeful for the future, and grateful for the blessings to come.

If the President had wanted a biblical text for his proclamation, he would’ve done well with this morning’s lesson from the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy. It notes the launch of a new nation, and the arrival of that nation’s people into a new land, a rich and bountiful land. It views the land as a gift from God. And it calls upon the people to acknowledge God’s generosity, and to recognize God as the Author of all the good that was, and is, and is to come; to acknowledge God’s goodness by offering God the first fruits of the blessings that God has given to them. In making that first fruits offering, they were saying, “We trust that God will continue to provide, so we are grateful for what is to come.”

It’s kind of a peculiar concept. How can you be grateful for something that hasn’t happened yet? Well, it is peculiar…unless, one has confidence in the Providence of God, who is Lord of the past, present and future. Under God’s eternal care, and in the mystery of eternity, there is a simultaneity to past, present and future. We think of these in a linear way – past, present and future occurring in sequence – but for God and those who live in God – for God and those who put their *confidence* in God – past, present and future all participate in the one eternal reality of God. What is to come is already known to God – what is to come has already been imagined by God – and because God has imagined it, it is good.

Deuteronomy gives us a clue to this blessing of simultaneity. The one who is bringing that first fruit offering to God must tell the story of God’s goodness in bringing the people out of Egypt and into this bountiful land. It’s a story of generations past, yet it’s to be told as if the people bringing the offering were there: 100 or more years earlier. “When the Egyptians treated *us* harshly,” the people are to say, “*we* cried to the Lord” (Dt. 26:6-7). Did you hear that? These things happened to their great-grandparents or great-great grandparents or maybe even further back than that, but they’re told to imagine these burdens and these blessings as if they happened to the people who are bringing their offering to the Lord *now*.

And it goes on. “The Lord brought *us* out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm…and he brought *us* into this place and gave *us* this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me” (Dt. 26:8-10).

More than 3,000 years later, as we say these same words, it’s as if we too were oppressed in the land of Egypt. More than 3,000 years later it’s as if we too were given the gift of the Promise Land. And some 230 years later, it’s as if we too, in the wake of a Revolution, were given liberty in *this* bountiful land; it’s as if we too authored and embraced a Constitution in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves *and our posterity*; we are grateful for what is to come. It’s as if we too fought for the freedom of this land, it’s as if we too can celebrate *now* the *new* birth of freedom that shall yet come into being for *all* people in this nation; this land where President Reagan famously said, “Our best days are yet to come.” In the mystery of eternity, past, present and future all flow together. Trusting in the Providence of God, we can be grateful for what is to come.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, I want to suggest three takeaways from this biblical notion of looking forward into the future with gratitude.

First: Our best years really are ahead of us. As a congregation, as a nation, as the whole inhabited earth, our best years are ahead of us. We’ve got some tough work to do in the meantime if we are to thrive as a congregation and tackle the challenges of climate change as a planet, but with faith and hope we can tackle those tough assignments because our best years are ahead of us and God is guiding us into that future. As we move forward, there are some things that you and I have held near and dear to our hearts may not be part of that promising future. But some of those blessings that we have known could not have been imagined by our forbearers; just as we can’t imagine some of the even greater blessings that will be known to our grandchildren and great-grandchildren and the generations to come.

The best years are ahead of us. That’s the hope that has inspired the people of biblical faith for millennia. It’s the hope that propelled them out of Egypt and into the Promise Land. It’s the hope that has urged them forward each time they’ve heard God’s call to live into a new adventure. They have had such hope – perhaps I should say *we* have had such hope – because they and we have placed our trust in a God who has gone before us like a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night; and a God who has provided for us, like manna in the wilderness, all along the way. That same God who goes before us and provides for us now and in all the days ahead. This building is going to be hopping with community activity 5 and 10 years from now. There will be children and youth whose faith will be flourishing here because we will have committed – *we* will have committed – in the coming months to forming their faith through our involvement in the Children Worship and Wonder ministry. Men will be recovering from addiction and despair because of the ministry of the Men’s Warming Center. And young people seemingly destined for such addiction and despair will be walking instead into a bright future because of our Camp ministry.

We are grateful for the future because God is waiting for us in the future, waiting there to bless us with an abundance of good things. We are grateful for what is to come.

Second: When we make a first fruits offering to God, we are *trusting* God to *provide* these future blessings. When we, like the Israelites, offer back to God the first and the best of what God has given to us – each week or each month, right off the top – we are saying, “God, I thank you for all of the past blessings which you have bestowed upon your people, and I trust that you will provide what we need in the present and the future: what my family needs, and what my church needs.

And if you have any doubt that God does provide, then you should’ve been in the Church Office around the first of November. Within the space of 1 week we received 3 checks for a total of $143,000 and change. And the following week we had an outpouring of hospitality that you’ll hear more about during the Invitation to Giving. And all the while the pledges for next year were pouring in. I mean, I have to tell you, folks, this blessing stuff is for real! The whole notion that we worship a generous God – a God of abundance – it’s both grounded in scripture and born out in experience. You can *trust* it. And the more often you make a first fruits offering, the more frequently you’ll experience it and the more *deeply* you’ll trust it. God deserves not our leftovers, but our first and our best. Because, you see, God gives the Church and God gives the world God’s first and God’s best: which is God’s gift of Jesus Christ. The One who has risen from the dead is Lord of the future. Therefore, we can be grateful for what is to come.

Third: The scarcity that we so often fear is a secular myth. The notion that we live in a world of scarce resources and that we have to compete for those resources was framed by 18th century philosophers and propagated by 19th century capitalists. They looked at the world through lenses ground by greed and fear, and they saw scarcity. But when you look at the same world through lenses ground by biblical faith – lenses ground by trust and hope and love – you see abundance, and generosity, and a God who provides. None of us sees the world as it really is. All of us see the world as shaped by our perspectives and assumptions and beliefs. If you believe in scarcity, you’ll see scarcity. If you believe in abundance, you’ll see abundance.

As you know, I have some vision issues. A history of detached retinas will do that to you. So some days, when I’m having trouble seeing, I figure that I just have to suck it up and deal with it. But sometimes Helen will say, “Let me clean your glasses.” And then, oh my goodness, it’s amazing how much more clearly I can see! Well, think of scarcity as being like smudges on our glasses. Think of abundance as being the clear wisdom of biblical faith that is ground into a proper pair of lenses. When we view reality through biblical lenses, we can see the generosity of God, and we can be grateful for what is to come.

I want to conclude with another Presidential Proclamation of Thanksgiving. President Abraham Lincoln, with an eye to both the past and the future, issued his call for a National Day of Thanksgiving on October 3, 1863; the same date as President Washington’s proclamation. And it was the same 4th Thursday of November – November 26 – that he earmarked for Thanksgiving Day. But it was a very different time because, of course, when Lincoln issued his proclamation, this nation was engaged in a great Civil War. The President asked the nation to give thanks for an abundant harvest, and for the victories of the Union Army over the forces of slavery and oppression. The thing is, that fall, the Union Army did not look very victorious. It had just suffered a *horrible* defeat at the Battle of Chickamauga. Yes, there had been victories in July at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, but at a dreadful cost in life and limb; and there had been little to celebrate since then. Yet this was the context in which a despairing President called for a day of thanksgiving. And this was the context in which he spoke, at Gettysburg on November 19, of a new birth of freedom. Where were the signs that freedom was being reborn? What was there to be thankful for? But 6 days later, the Union Army scored a stunning victory on the ridges above Chattanooga, Tennessee. As the Union soldiers stood atop Missionary Ridge on the late afternoon of November 25, they saw the forces of slavery literally on the run. It looked like the rebels were skedaddling all the way back to Atlanta! And the next day, the nation did indeed give thanks. It was as if President Lincoln, a prophet in politician’s clothing, saw it all coming. Way back in October, he was grateful for what was to come.

And so are we. On this day we give thanks to God for all that God has provided, and we dedicate ourselves to giving back to God the first fruits of what God has entrusted to us, and we do so trusting in the ongoing generosity of God. We are reaching outward to connect people with God’s abundance; the very abundance that God has showered upon us. Great things are happening in our midst; and we are grateful for what is to come. Amen.