

Thanksgiving
Deuteronomy 8:7-18, Thanksgiving, Year A
24 November 2011
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

In September 1863, author Sarah Hale wrote to Abraham Lincoln encouraging the President to proclaim a national holiday of thanksgiving. Her timing was awkward. At essentially the same moment, Lincoln received dispatches from the battlefield at Chickamauga, a dozen miles south of Chattanooga. General Rosencrans, who commanded the forces there, admitted a horrible defeat for the Union saying, “We have met with a severe disaster.” Over sixteen thousand Yankee boys lost their lives.

His counterpart in the Confederacy wrote to Richmond, “The whole South will be filled again with patriotic fervor, and in the North there will be a corresponding depression.”ⁱ

Even in light of such bravado, in truth things were equally dismal for the Confederacy. This was, after all, the autumn just beyond the defeat at Gettysburg and the fall of Vicksburg. It was, truly, the very autumn of Southern hope which would never again rise so high, no matter what glimmer Chickamauga might give it.

In the wake of so much blood on both sides, and with the promise of a great deal more to come, President Lincoln received Sarah Hale’s letter, encouraging him to declare not a day of prayer, nor a day of penitence, nor a day of mourning, but a day of *thanksgiving*. And he did.

The President declared, “In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity...[I invite us] to set apart, and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens.”ⁱⁱ

In 1636, during the Thirty Years War, Lutheran pastor Martin Rinkhart found himself trapped in the village of Eilenberg in Saxony. The Swedish army had besieged the town, and plague broke out among the frightened citizens. Slowly but surely, every other pastor in Eilenberg succumbed to the disease, until Rinkhart was the only one left. Some days he officiated as many as fifty funerals, and one day those funerals included that of his own wife. Even so, in the midst of such despair, Martin Rinkhart penned a hymn we sing this day:

Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hand and voices,
Who wondrous things have done, in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers arms, hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

In ancient days, after wandering for decades in a desert land, Moses draws the people Israel together to lay before them what they can expect in the future. He presents a vision so unlike what they have known, first in Egypt as slaves and now as wandering nomads in search of a home, that it must sound like fantasy.

Moses says, “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a land of flowing streams, of wheat and barley, of olive trees and honey, where you will lack nothing. You will build fine houses and live in them, and your herds and flocks will multiply.”

In the midst of all this promise, which must seem far-fetched to the Israelites since they are still shielding their eyes from desert sand, Moses encourages, “Remember the Lord your God, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock and fed you in the wilderness with manna.”

Again and again and again, we find that the profound stories of thanksgiving come not from times of ease but rather from times of extreme hardship, depravation, and near-despair. Lincoln’s call for a national day of thanksgiving came in the midst of the most uncertain moment—for both sides—of the Civil War. Rinkhart’s timeless hymn came as he buried scores of his loved one and siege engines were pressing against the city walls. Moses’ call for remembrance came well before there was anything good to remember.

On the face of it, it makes little sense. It’s counter-intuitive. And on this day of good food and good company, of football and armchair comfort, it might not be worth considering. Except for the fact that you’re *here*, neglecting the turkey in the oven for a few minutes on a Thursday morning, which likely means you wonder how and why God ought to be considered on this day of thanksgiving.

Fleming Rutledge, who will be our Dodson lecturer next year, offers this:

The life of thankfulness—biblically speaking—is lived in view of the hard things of existence. As the life of thanksgiving deepens, we discover that the more mature prayers of thanksgiving are not those offered for the obvious blessings, but those spoken in gratitude for obstacles overcome, for insights gained, for lessons learned, for increased humility, for help received in time of need, for strength to persevere, for opportunities to serve others.ⁱⁱⁱ

Perhaps that is the difference. For Lincoln, for Rinkhart, for all the others, thanksgiving is not merely a momentary observance. Rather, the momentary observance is an icon, a symbol, of a *life* of thankfulness.

In my work, I am privileged to sit at the bedside of people as they are dying. And I see, in the end, two approaches to death. One is characterized by disappointment and fear, a natural response to pain and the end of one's worldly journey to be sure, but not the only response. The other is characterized by a profound sense of thanksgiving for whatever life has brought. In some cases, for some people, these blessings are so few and so small that, were it me, I don't know that I'd recognize them. For some, they have arisen like single sprigs of grass on a desert floor, in the midst of lives mostly characterized by disappointment, loss, and unfulfilled hopes. Even so, there are those who smile genuinely and with abiding thanks both for those brief oases as well as for the perseverance and strength that has seen them through the desert of their lives. And for those who do, gratitude truly, absolutely *changes everything*.

Again, Fleming Rutledge says, "Gratitude is soul-enlarging. Gratitude is liberating. Gratitude really does create new conditions... The giving of thanks is not just an activity to be taken up at certain times and set aside at other times. It is a whole way of life."^{iv}

For those who live lives of thankfulness, fear loosens its hold. It is amazing to see. Obstacles—whether material loss, illness, or pain—lose their power, and blessings begin to *empower*. Thankfulness becomes a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, because even the faintest blessing, when showered with gratitude, grows like a flower garden to fill the senses with good things.

A final story. I once saw a presentation by a physician who had contracted esophageal cancer. His prognosis had been six months, but he lived with the cancer for five years before it overwhelmed his body. In the presentation, made very near the end of his life, someone in the audience asked him whether he was religious. The doctor paused for a long time and said, "I don't know how to answer that except to say that I pray."

"What do you pray?" was the next, predictable question.

This time without pause the physician answered, even as he stood weakened before his audience, everyone in the room fully aware that his life would very soon end, "My prayers take one form: *Thank you, thank you, thank you.*"

At the end of a life so lived, when one looks back the blemishes and regrets barely make the movie reel of remembrance. What defines that life is thanksgiving, and the life of gratitude is recollected with joy and with a hold that is easy to let go and give to God.

Such a life gives us the strength to walk through the battlefields and the deserts of our days. Such a life reminds us that, with love and a God who knows us, we have so very much for which to be thankful.

Amen.

ⁱ McPherson, James M. *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction*, pg. 336.

ⁱⁱ Robertson, James. *The Untold Civil War: Exploring the Human Side of War*, pg. 252.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rutledge, Fleming. *The Bible and the New York Times*, pp. 22-23.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, pg. 22.