

## “Expressing Thanks and Gratitude”

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*Deuteronomy 26:1-11* When you have come into the land that the Lord our God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.” When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; 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.” You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Have you ever had a time where you have struggled through ups and downs, day in and day out to reach a goal? It has taken everything in you to get to the finish. For me what comes to mind is walking the Camino. It took 39 days to walk that 500 mile journey. I had suffered a horrible blister, hiked up and down mountains, walked days in the sunshine and rain, met and said good-bye to dear people, got lost and found my way and carried all my belongings on my back (36 out of the 39 days). I will never forget my first glimpse of the steeples of the Santiago Cathedral. It brought tears to my eyes. It was then I knew that “Praise be to God, I was going to make it.” The goal was in sight and this pilgrimage, which would never be forgotten, would soon be coming to an end. This day was truly filled with joy and celebration!

The Israelites are about to arrive in the promise land. They have spent 40 years walking through the wilderness. They have complained a lot! They have questioned many times why they had to leave the life of slavery in Egypt to walk in the desert. God has fed them, supplied them with water and led them by fire and cloud throughout this entire time. There have been people who have died, babies born and relationships formed and ended. They were there on the plains of Moab looking over the river at the land flowing with milk and honey. They had finally reached their destination.

The wandering is over and they are about to be settled. The Israelites are about to inherit what was promised to them and their ancestors. They will have a home...not a tent. They will receive land where they can plant vegetables and fruit. They will receive the gift of a home and harvest food for them to eat and thrive. It will be there in abundance, which will be a blessing from God.

Have you ever inherited something? Usually when you inherit something, it is a gift from a relative or a loved one that has died. They have left it to you in their memory. I remember when my cousins inherited money from my aunt's estate; two of them were able to buy homes with it. When my Great Aunt Dorothy died, she left my mother her jewelry. My mother took some of the diamonds and made it into a ring which was my college graduation gift. I still wear this ring today and think of my Aunt Dorothy. When my grandmother died, I got her china cabinet which stands in my living room. My grandmother did not have much so I feel very fortunate to have this from her. Every time I look at it I remember her. For the most part, the things you inherit are a gift that was not earned but given in love.

The Israelites are about to receive their inheritance from God. God has not died but is very much alive. The living God has loved these people through the liberation out of Egypt, the 40 years in the wilderness and now the entrance into the promise land. God has always been with them and will continue to be with them. In return for this promise, there is the expectation that they express thanks and gratitude to God.

When my children were growing up and as a parent, I was teaching them how to respect others by constantly reminding them to say, "thank you!" If they were to get a ride home from a friend's parent, or if they went over to spend the night at a friend's home or if they received a gift from someone, I would always ask them if they had said, "Thank you!" After a while, they would roll their eyes and say, "Yes, we said thank you, mom!" As an adult, I have to remind myself of this. I can get busy, caught up in my thoughts and forget this, especially when it comes to God. Everyone wants to be appreciated and recognized for what they do. God is no different.

God wanted the people to show their thanks and gratitude by giving of their first fruits from their harvest. They were to take it to the church. When they presented it to the priest, they had to remember the journey that got them to where they were at that point. It was not just about giving thanks and showing gratitude but also remembering the past. They had to go hand in hand. The offering was meaningless, if they could not remember all the people who had made the journey with them and that God had been there every step of the way.

Last year, I believe I shared with you in a sermon that my spiritual word was "positive". It was not a word that I really liked but it was one that God had wanted for me. As I pondered this word and worked through it during the year, I found myself looking for ways to express my gratitude to God. To stay positive, I found myself searching for ways to say thanks to God as I examined each day. Now, there were some days that were pretty bad and they stunk! Those were the days that I really didn't want to say thanks to God because it was difficult to find things that I was grateful for. So, I had to remember that I was able to walk on 2 feet and I was still breathing in and out. I was thankful for the small things like a diet coke that maybe gave me some energy.

After the Israelites gave their thank offering and remembered their path that got them there, scripture said they celebrated. The people of God knew that God had taken them to this point and it was God that would continue to be with them in the future.

For several years during this season, I have taken one Sunday to walk you through a time of reflection, meditation and prayer. One of the reasons for this 40 day Lenten journey is

to take the time and to examine our lives. You received a blessing with oil when you entered the service today. I wanted to take a few minutes for us to think about how God has blessed you in your life and give thanks to God just as the Israelites so long ago were asked to do.

- Quiet yourself. Remember that in prayer you are entering into a relationship with God. Using whatever method you find most helpful, take a few moments to move beyond whatever may distract you or intrude on your quiet. Gently find the still point within your being.
- Allow yourself time to appreciate the silence. Invite God to be present with you in this time of reflection and prayer. Breathe in and smell the frankincense oil, this is an oil of love and truth.
- The Israelites are receiving their promised inheritance from God by entering the promise land. What have you inherited from God? What does it mean to be heirs of God's promise? How do you identify as a child of God?
- The Israelites will go and farm the land. They will eventually produce a crop that will be harvested. We may not be farmers but we are given gifts from God that can yield fruit. What are your gifts from God? What fruit have you produced? Are you able to share this gift or fruit with others?
- Remember a time when you worked really hard at a task for someone else and they showed a great deal of gratitude toward you. How did this make you feel? Can you remember a time when you expressed how grateful you were to someone else? How did that feel? How do show your thanks and what words or actions do you use when expressing gratitude toward someone?
- The world can be a busy place. Sometimes the chaos of life or the tragic news of our world can be overwhelming. Is it difficult to thank God sometimes? Do you find yourself forgetting to thank God? How did you show gratitude to God? When was the last time, you said thanks to God?
- Acts of thanksgiving can be meaningless, if we don't remember our past. Who are the people who have helped you in your faith journey? How did they help you grow in your faith? Did you express your gratitude by sharing with them how important they were to you? Who have you nurtured in their walk of faith? Have there been times that you have struggled in your faith? What helped you get back on track?

Gracious God, we walk this Lenten journey toward Jerusalem examining our relationship with you. Help us to feel your presence when we doubt. Open our eyes so that we can see and use the many gifts that you have given to us. We offer our gratitude for your generosity in our lives. Heal our hearts when we cannot find our voice to thank you. May we never forget where we have come from and the people that have made a difference in our faith. We especially give thanks for our Savior Jesus Christ who freed us from our sin and who we prepare to celebrate at the empty tomb on Easter morning. Amen.