

October 9, 2022
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Thanksgiving Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Thanksgiving as Remembering”

“So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.”

Even though I have lived in Canada for many years and became a Canadian citizen in March, I am still surprised when I see turkeys in the supermarket in September. My first reaction is that it seems very early to put out food for Thanksgiving, until I remember that Thanksgiving is in October in Canada, not in late November as it is in the USA. While I know that Thanksgiving Sunday is the second Sunday in October (especially because I preach and lead worship on this day), I still find myself falling back into old patterns, where Thanksgiving was on a Thursday and was part of a four-day weekend that included “Black Friday” and the beginning of the Christmas shopping season.

Some people have asked me which Thanksgiving I celebrate, since I am a dual citizen. My answer, of course, is “both!” No one has to convince me to enjoy two turkey dinners in one year; and on a deeper level Thanksgiving is an occasion that we do not only celebrate on one day, but as people of faith we are called to give thanks to God every day for all that our Lord has given to us. In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches that our response to all of God’s blessings is that “*I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him.*” Our communion liturgy proclaims that “*its indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ.*” In his letter to the Philippians, Paul encourages his readers to “*not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*” (Philippians 4:6). In all seasons God’s people are called to remember that “*all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. We thank you, Lord, we thank you, Lord, for all your love.*” (ELW Hymn 681).

It is most appropriate to gather in Thanksgiving, no matter when our day of thanksgiving may occur. In fact, thanksgiving is meant to be a continuing practice for God’s people, a reminder that God provides for our daily bread “*without our prayer, even to all evil people, but we ask in this prayer that God cause us to recognize what our daily bread is and to receive it with thanksgiving.*” (*Small Catechism*). The act of thanksgiving as an occasion for remembering all that God provides for us is at the heart of the teaching in today’s first lesson from Deuteronomy, which emphasized the central place that worship has in the life of every member of the Israelite nation. This

includes the shape of the liturgical prayers, confessions, and theological meaning of worship. The teaching is set out as an expression of the thankfulness with which Israel was to celebrate before God the immensity of the gift that God's choosing, calling, and preservation of the nation had made possible. It was a reminder that *"to be an Israelite was to be a beneficiary of a long history of God's gracious providence and care, which had made slaves into free and prosperous citizens."* (Ronald E. Clements). The setting for this is the summer harvest, the Festival of Ingathering that included an open acknowledgement that the land itself belongs to God.

- "Every third year you shall bring out the full tithes of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake." – Deuteronomy 14:28-29.

The introductory rubric (instruction) explains the circumstances in which this confessional recital is to be made. The occasion will be when the forty-year sojourn in the wilderness has ended, when the people of Israel *"have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it"* (26:1). As a people who for centuries were enslaved in a foreign land who had spent a generation wandering in the wilderness, this is wondrous news that the covenant promises of land first made to Abraham were being renewed for this generation of Israelites. On this occasion, the people are to *"take some of the first if all the 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."* (26:2). Offerings of grain and fruit grown in the very soil of the land would confirm the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (*"And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God."* – Genesis 17:8). According to Jewish tradition, first fruit offerings were made of seven species native to the land: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates. These first fruits were to be placed in a basket and handed to the priest at the central sanctuary. The priest was then to place the basket of gifts before the altar as a gesture acknowledging that the produce belonged to God, representing a part of what God had given to the worshipper. It is an open acknowledgement that the land itself belongs to God: *"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."* (26:3).

The offering of first fruits of the harvest is to be accompanied by a confession of faith that is in the form of a creed, declaring the story of God's actions that had shaped the

nation's faith. Israel's faith is inseparably linked to the territory on which the produce had been grown and elicited from the story of the past a message concerning the nature and purpose of God. It served as an act of remembrance that Israel had been brought into existence by divine grace and continued to be saved by grace alone.

- “It was a message that gave assurance, faith, and hope for the future ... In this simple thanksgiving ceremony, the declaration of that grace was reaffirmed as Israel's continually renewed confession of faith.” – Clements.

The act of remembering when presenting the first fruits begins with the recognition that “*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 prosperous.*” (26:5). This recalls the Israelites' ancestor Jacob, also known as Israel, who fled from his brother Esau's enmity to live with relatives in the land of Aram (“*Thus Isaac sent Jacob away; and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother.*” – Genesis 28:5) and who later sought refuge from famine in the land of Egypt:

- “When Israel set out on his journey with all that he had and came to Beer-sheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. God spoke to Israel in visions in the night, and said, ‘Jacob, Jacob.’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again; and Joseph's own hand shall close your eyes.’” – Genesis 46:1-4.

The blessings of Egypt soon became a curse for the descendants of Israel when “*the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us*” (26:6), the centuries in which the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt:

- “The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.” – Exodus 1:13-14.

When these enslaved people cried out to the Lord, “*the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.*” (26:7). In his call to Moses in the burning bush on Mount Horeb, the Lord declares that “*I have observed the misery of my people, who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the*

Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:7-8). The Lord fulfilled his promise when God “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.” (26:8-9). The communal memory “focuses on God’s responsiveness to the Israelites’ cries for protection and on God’s amazing power to deliver from oppression and to provide for a future filled with hope and abundance.” (Esther M. Menn).

Israel’s duty to obey the Torah, the Law of Moses, was a necessary way of responding to all the privileges to which its continued existence on the land bore testimony. In remembrance of all of God’s blessings and faithfulness in the past and present, *“now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” (26:10).*

- “God was Israel’s inescapable benefactor to whom it both had been and forever would be indebted. Without God, Israel was nothing ... By recalling the gracious divine purpose that had brought Israel into being in the first place, a firm basis for hope in the future was established.” – Clements.

After making this confession, those who offer their tithes are to *“set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God.”* The requirement that Israel should tithe the increase of all its produce was established as a visible expression of Israel’s observance of the Law: *“Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field.” (14:22).* This act of remembrance and thanksgiving was to be shared *“together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you” (26:11).* The Levites, generally equated with the priests in Deuteronomy, were a tribe not allotted a territory of their own but were supported in their religious service through such offerings (*“And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you together with your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, and the Levites who reside in your towns (since they have no allotment or inheritance with you).” – 12:12).* The “aliens” were foreigners who lived among the Israelites without owning land, people who the Torah instructs the Israelites to treat with care and compassion:

- “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” – Leviticus 19:33-34.

Enjoyment of God's sustenance was to be extended even farther to others listed in the description of the festival of *Shavuot* or Weeks: "*Rejoice before the LORD your God – you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you*" (Deuteronomy 16:11). To be negligent in this offering would have had serious consequences for membership within the community that recognizes that all they possess is a gift from God who brought them out of bondage into the land of promise upon which this produce was grown.

- "We can discern a remarkable wholeness and balance in the Israelite confession of faith. God is related personally and directly to each Israelite's actual situation. Faith is tied indissoluble to the demands, tasks, and necessities of daily life. The world of faith and the world of food, clothing, and territory are one world." – Clements.

We continue to follow the tradition of our ancestors in faith as on this Day of Thanksgiving (be it in October or November) we bring the first of the fruits of the harvest to present to the Lord as we remember all of the Lord's blessings that we have enjoyed in the past, and remember that as God was faithful to God's people in all times and places God will continue to be faithful to us in our present and future situations. Thanksgiving is a time to offer our thanks to God for all God has bestowed upon us, and a time to remember that we can heed the call of St. Paul to "*rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Thanksgiving is appropriate not only in times of abundance, of good health, and of joy and gladness; thanksgiving is also appropriate in times of struggle and difficulty, in moments of despair and depression, because the act of giving thanks recalls how God was with God's people even in their darkest moments, even as they lived under bondage and oppression. It reminds us that God is "*our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.*" Thanksgiving is an act of remembrance that gives us hope that no matter how difficult the road before us may be, we can live each day in trust and knowing that "*the LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold*" (Psalm 46:7).

- "God is. We are. In spite of our fumbles and because of God's grace we are not daunted by the troubles of this age, nor are we fearful of what is to come. We do not bless God for our wealth, our health, or for our feeble wisdom. We bless God that God is, that we are, and that his promise and love shall be with us when time itself shall be no more." – Peter Gomes.

There have been times when I have not felt very thankful, where offering thanksgivings publicly or privately has been challenging. I did not feel like giving thanks within weeks of my father's death, or when my health and the health of the people I love was failing. Standing at the altar and proclaiming that we should "*at all times and in all places offer thanks and praise*" was difficult when it was a time and a place where thanksgiving was the furthest thing from my mind. Giving thanks is easy when all is going well; but it is important also to give thanks at moments when we may not feel especially thankful, because the act of thanksgiving is a time of remembrance that even in life's darkest moments we are never alone, that even when we walk through the "valley of the shadow of death" we have the blessed assurance that God is with us, that the Lord is our shepherd, and that we have that blessed assurance that "*the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*" (Lamentations 3:22-23). In giving thanks in all circumstances, we remember that God is always with us not matter what circumstances we may find ourselves, even in moments of deepest darkness and most profound uncertainty.

- "That is what the practice of gratitude comes to. All around us, every day, there are gifts. Whether we are facing a crisis or not, no matter our challenges or feelings, there are gifts, most of which to unnoticed, unappreciated, and often disregarded ... Gratitude is not just a knock-your-socks-off revelation of goodness and beauty; it emerges as a daily – even hourly – disposition of appreciation toward familiar gifts, including the tailwinds of blessing." – Diana Butler Bass.

So no matter if it is in October or November – or any other month of the year – it is indeed the right time for us to give thanks, offering to God the first of the fruits of the abundant harvest that God has showered upon us "*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all*" (*Small Catechism*) as we remember that God's faithfulness to us in the past is the assurance that God will be with us in the future, that "*though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.*" Thanksgiving is an act of remembering God's steadfast, loving, sustaining presence at all times and in all places, that "*for the wonders that astound us, for the truths that still confound us, most of all, that love has found us, thanks be to God!*"

Amen.