



Remember the Lord

Thanksgiving, b, 11/22/09

Deuteronomy 8:11-20

Before this morning's scripture lesson the fledgling nation-to-be of Israel had come a long way towards their common goal of getting to the wonderful land, the Promised Land that God had pledged to them. If you remember the story of the Exodus from Sunday School you will recall all that they had suffered.

Their journey to the promised land began in slavery. God heard their cries and called Moses to tell old Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" But Pharaoh just made their work harder.

Ten plagues later Pharaoh let them go. Then Pharaoh decided to kill them all instead! But God made a way for Israel through the sea, that then collapsed upon Pharaoh's charioteers and destroyed the oppressors.

That was only the beginning. The rest of the journey took 40 years. For 40 years God fed the people bread from heaven. For 40 years God gave them water in the desert. For 40 years God taught Israel what it means to be God's people.

When they finally reached the Promised Land, God reminded them to give credit where credit was due. They would soon enter and possess the land. And it was a good land. A "land flowing with milk and honey." A land with water enough for grain crops and places well suited for flocks of sheep and goats. And the people would prosper in that land.

They would build cities. They would construct houses and communities. They would build presses for wine and olives. They would trade their goods with far away empires and become, if not rich, at least comfortable. They would change from a wandering band of escaped slaves into a significant power in their world.

And God said, "When this happens don't forget who made it all possible." "When you live in fine houses instead of tents, when your herds cover the land and you make profits from pelts and meat; when you eat off the land and have plenty left over; when your standard of living gets steadily better, don't say to yourself, 'Look what good I have done.' Don't give thanks to your own ability or hard work or intelligence. Remember that it was God who brought you here and made all of these good things possible. Honor God, keep the commandments, and be faithful to the covenant."

Friends, that is what Thanksgiving is all about: giving credit to God for the blessings we have. The pilgrims who founded this thanksgiving feast also came a long way to get to America, their Promised Land. They suffered religious oppression in the Europe where holding a dissenting view was paramount to rebellion. People who worshiped or believed differently, were in constant danger.

So the pilgrims set out across the sea. And God made a way for them through the sea. Despite getting lost and even landing in the wrong place, they made it. A foothold in the new land was established.

But the place they landed was a wilderness. This was not a promised land by Biblical standards. It was potentially rich, but it was also at the beginning just plain rugged. But they were blessed with freedom. And with the help of their new Native American neighbors they learned to cultivate the land.

On the threshold of that new life, they stopped and said thanks. They acknowledged from the beginning that it was God who had made their freedom possible. And it was God who had blessed them with food to see them through the winter. And by stopping to thank God they set an example for all who came after them to follow.

Our nation has come a long way since then. After the pilgrims, many others came seeking religious freedom. Many came seeking economic opportunity. Some fled famine. Some fled war. Some fled persecution. Some were brought over against their will in the holds of slave ships.

The nation we have become is much different from those humble pilgrim/colonist/slave beginnings. When America started we just had enough food to see us from one season to the next. Now our surplus grain feeds much of the hungry of the world. America started as a patchwork of poor coastal colonies. Now, by many measures, we are the richest and most powerful nation in the world.

We've come a long way: from an oppressed people, to the most formidable influence in the world; from colonies to superpower; from wilderness to industrial giant.

Our ancestors and we have built cities and factories and fine houses. We have come to expect our standard of living to rise.

And many years after our forebears set foot on this continent, we hear God's word. And it tells us not to forget who made all these blessings possible. "When you have built fine houses and lived in them, when you have comfort and wealth, when you enjoy freedom and safety, don't give yourself credit. Give God the credit."

So we have a feast day of giving thanks. But Thanksgiving Day should be just the beginning. God's says, "Therefore, keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and fearing him."(Deut. 8:6) Praying and feasting are fine, but righteousness and mercy are more important. God had commanded that we believers be a holy people. If we are really thankful, we should do justice, love kindness, and seek mercy. We should care for the widow, the orphan, the homeless. We should show hospitality to the stranger. We should love our neighbors.

In the process you will discover that material blessings that we like to focus on, because they are tangible, the material blessings are not really so important in the grand scheme of things as we might have expected. Our forebearers knew it. Recall that even in their times of greatest material deprivation, they were still able to turn thankfully to God, the Source of all goodness. Perhaps a story will illustrate what I mean.

Some years back in Wyoming there was a man, Elijah (we shall call him) and his wife that we shall call Orpah, who were ranchers with a modest amount of cattle and land. They were good stewards of their possessions and hard workers and were able over time to increase the amount of land they owned and the number of cattle they raised until they had more than anyone else in their county. They developed a reputation for hosting large parties. People came from miles around to attend these barbeques and to partake of their generous hospitality.

Then it seemed, all of the sudden, from several angles Elijah and Orpah fell on hard times. In the spring the cattle were struck by a curious ailment, and most died or had to be destroyed. Most of his cash crop was lost to the worst drought in decades. During that fall a band of thieves stole most of

Elijah's prize horses. Finally they were forced to sell all they had except for an old car and enough personal belongings to furnish a small house.

Elijah and Orpah were in their 70's and much too proud to seek public welfare, but a neighbor invited them to live and work on his ranch with him.

"Elijah," he said, "there is always plenty of machinery that needs fixing, and you are still an excellent mechanic. You need not do the heavy work.

"Orpah, you can help feed the chickens and be in charge of the garden. I will provide you with a simple cottage and ample food to meet your needs."

They accepted his offer.

One day guests arrived at that ranch for a party the owner was hosting. Elijah supervised the slaughter of a young calf and Orpah was in charge of the barbeque. As the guests ate and drank, Elijah and Orpah passed by in the distance on the way to their cottage. "Do you see that man?" the owner asked the group? "He once was the richest man in the area. Perhaps you have heard of him, his name is Elijah."

"Of course I have heard of him," said one of the guests, "Everyone knows of Elijah, of the parties he'd throw, and, also, of the troubles that took him down. Can we speak to him? "

"I'll call him," said the rancher,"but be careful. He is a proud man."

Walking toward the cottage he called to Elijah and Orpah to join them.

"Tell me sir, " one of the guests began, "isn't it hard for you to watch us over there enjoying ourselves? Does your present life make you yearn for the old days?"

Elijah smiled, "Ask my wife. She is the speaker of the family concerning these matters." Directing his words to Orpah, the guest spoke in aloud and

brazen voice, "Orpah, how do you deal with the change from your former riches to your present misery?"

Orpah tucked her head and smiled to herself, then answered slowly and calmly, "For 50 years the old man and I lived together on our ranch, seeking happiness but never finding it. Now, in our second year here, when we have nothing left, really, and we live as hired laborers, we have finally found true happiness. We need nothing more."

The guests looked at each other with puzzled glances, but didn't say a word, as Orpah straightened herself up taller, and began a great, broad, relaxed smile at her husband, and she spoke again.

"I speak the truth. We sought happiness for half a century, and while we were rich in things.... we never found it. Now we are poor in things, but for the first time, we are content."

"When we had land and cattle the old man and I never knew a moment's peace. We had not time to talk, to think deeply about life or pray to God. We had so many worries - how shall we serve the guests, what will people think, will the hired men cheat us? We did not sleep well at night for fear that animals would attack the new calves or robbers would steal the prize horses. We argued over finances - and that is a sin. The old man thought we should invest one way, and I thought another."

"And now?"

"Now the old man and I wake in the morning.... and we talk to each other.... with love and respect. We have nothing to quarrel about, nothing to worry about, really. Our only concern is to serve the owner well. There is time to talk, to listen, time to see the handiwork of God in our world.... and time pray to God and offer our thanks..... After 50 years of always looking

for happiness running our place, we have found it, here, on somebody else's."ⁱ

Today you and I might think about and list the things for which we are thankful and we are filled with gratitude to God. We think of family and friends, our faith. We are grateful for the bread that we eat, the shelter we enjoy, but more than that we are grateful for the food which does not perish. We are grateful for the bread which has come down from heaven and gives life that is utterly complete and timelessly eternal.

On Thanksgiving Sunday we bask in the glory of our generous God who is faithful, caring for our needs. We take a moment, as God in Deuteronomy directs us, to "REMEMBER THE LORD" in sheer gratitude .

Thanks be to God!

ⁱ Adapted from *Stories for the Journey: A Sourcebook for Christian Storytellers*, by William R. White