

November 20, 2016
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Pastor Elizabeth Kelsey
Creekside COB

“What the Grinch Discovered”

The scripture Leonard read this morning is a beautiful Thanksgiving story. In fact, you could say it’s the story of the First Thanksgiving, and the Pilgrims borrowed the idea.

The recitation of thanksgiving in Deuteronomy 25 begins with Jacob, son of Isaac, husband of Leah and Rachel, and father of 12 sons. A famine forced Jacob and his family to move to Egypt in order to survive. In the years that followed, the Hebrew families grew to be a large nation, just as God had promised Abraham. So large, in fact, that it frightened the Pharaoh, who made them slaves in order to prevent them from taking over the land of Egypt. God called Moses to help free the people from slavery, and through signs and miracles the Hebrews escaped. I think you know the story of the waters parting at the Red Sea so the people could get away.

Commentator Nick Carter continues the story. “Imagine this: after 39 years, 11 months, and one week in the wilderness, the Israelites are gathered on the plains of Moab, poised to enter the promised land. After nearly forty years of feeling lost and unsure, having had to learn a mountain of laws and rules, after being chastised for bad behavior (often well deserved!), and after having spent a good deal of their sojourn being confused, underfed, and poorly housed -- they wondered why in the world they had left Egypt in the first place. But now here they sitting on the highlands overlooking the Jordan River Valley, the promised land lying in the distance! Everything they have endured, worked, and sacrificed for is at long last within their reach. The sense of God’s grace and blessing must be overwhelming.”¹

¹Feast of the Word, Year C, Vol. 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, general editors, (Westminster John Knox), 2009.

And now they were in that Promised Land, harvesting the “first fruits” of the land. God had instructed them what to do with the “first fruits.” They were to be put in a basket and taken to the place of worship where they should tell the priest “I announce to God that I have entered the land that God promised our ancestors.” Then they were to recite the story of God’s deliverance and grace -- about Jacob and Egypt and God’s strong arm.

You see, it wasn’t enough just to hand off their “first fruits” on that First Thanksgiving. Part of their gratitude was to remember who they were and where they came from. God delivered them from slavery. God fed them in the desert. God brought them out of homelessness to this fertile land. God deserves their thanksgiving.

If you think about it, there might be something unsettling about bringing “first fruits.” They are the very best of the crop. There is no guarantee that the rest of the crop will come in. Yet giving back to God doesn’t really leave us poorer. It is implied in every offertory statement we hear in Sunday worship, that God is a giver.

In an AMBS online course I am immersing myself in the scripture story any way I can. I highlighted all the verbs, read the text out loud in several translations, drew pictures of the action, checked commentaries and sermons from other preachers, used the Bible dictionary to understand names, places and rituals.

Half way through the study, I noticed the changes in point of view in this recitation of history. It begins in third person, referring to Father Jacob who went down to Egypt. But then the recitation switches to first person plural -- to “us” and “we.” Although the reader probably didn’t experienced slavery first hand, he nevertheless identified personally with his family history. The Egyptians battered “us”; “we” cried out to God, God listened to “our” voice, took “us” out of Egypt, brought “us” to this place. Then it becomes first person singular. Here “I” am. I’ve brought the first fruits that “I’ve grown” on this ground you gave “me.” To me, these changes in point of view feel significant. The reader knows his history, but he also recognizes himself as part of that heritage, and his gratitude is personal.

I also noticed a focus on time -- future, past, and present. When the Hebrews offered their first fruits to God, they were trusting that God

would provide for future needs as well. The recitation of the past recalls God's strong arm of deliverance and God's provision during 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Having offered God the "first fruits," it's now time to have a party! Celebrate what God has given to you and your family. Invite the priests and the strangers in your midst to join with you.

This celebration of first fruits was not a one-time thing. It became a yearly holiday, known as the feast of the harvest or feast of weeks. It was celebrated on the 50th day after the beginning of the harvest, and was later given the name "Pentecost," which means 50. It was the same harvest festival taking place when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples and others in Acts 2. Their tradition became taking off work to travel to Jerusalem to give a tithe of their crops. The recitation of "first fruits" moved from thanksgiving for material things to gratitude for God's grace and protection. Our thanksgiving story is the culminating act of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes in the excitement of opening gifts, a child forgets to say thank you and the parent has to remind them, "What do you say?" We can tell if a gift is appreciated by the enthusiasm or lack thereof by the thank you. Sadly, there are some also adults who seldom say thank you or express their gratitude for what people do for them, as though they are entitled to the goodwill of others. King Duncan remarks, "Our addiction to material goods may actually make us less grateful than if we had very little." Often it is the poor person who is most generous, because they know what it is to have need.

Once a minister who was called to the scene of a woman standing on a roof ready to end her life. The minister said "I'm sorry no one loves you. Your grandchildren must not pay any attention to you." The woman replied, "No, my family loves me and my grandchildren are wonderful. I have eight of them." The pastor took a step toward her and said, "But then you must be very poor to be so desperate to jump." She said, "Do I look like I need a meal? We live near Central Park in a beautiful apartment." The pastor took another step. "Then why do you want to jump?" The woman paused and then replied, "I don't remember." The pastor had successfully helped the woman take her mind off her problems and reminded her to be thankful. As they continued to talk, the woman shared pictures of her

grandchildren, and later became a volunteer on a suicide prevention hotline.²

Being thankful takes our mind off material things and focuses it on relationships. It is significant that our thanksgiving to God is not complete until it has been shared with others.

You remember the children's classic, "How the Grinch Stole Christmas." In this story "the Grinch enters all the homes [in Whoville] by way of their chimneys, disguised as Santa Claus. He takes all the presents and ornaments, the trees and stockings, and even their food down to the last morsel. He drags his loot up the mountain and then looks down on Whoville with a sinister grin. He is listening for the cries and wailings of the people to start as they wake up on Christmas morning to discover a Christmas lost. What he hears instead surprises him. Up from the town of the Whos comes a joyful Christmas carol. They are singing! "Why?" he asks. He learns it is because Christmas resides not in things, but in the heart which is thankful. He could not steal their gratitude."³

In a few minutes we will close this service with the hymn, "Now thank we all our God." It was written by "Martin Rinkert, a minister in the little town of Eilenburg, Germany, some 350 years ago. He was the son of a poor coppersmith, but somehow, he managed to work his way through an education. Finally, in the year 1617, he was offered the post of Archdeacon in his hometown parish. A year later, what has come to be known as the Thirty-Years-War broke out. His town was caught right in the middle. In 1637, the massive plague that swept across the continent hit Eilenburg... people died at the rate of fifty a day and the man called upon to bury most of them was Martin Rinkert. In all, over 8,000 people died, including Martin's own wife. His labors finally came to an end, just one year after the conclusion of the war. His ministry spanned 32 years, with all but the first and the last overwhelmed by the great conflict that engulfed his town. Tough circumstances in which to be thankful! But he managed. And he wrote these words:

² King Duncan, "Counting your blessings," www.sermonsfromseattle.com

³ Brett Blair, www.eSermons.com

**Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom his world rejoices.**

The Christian faith affirms that in the midst of everything -- in death, in loss, in hardship -- we are to turn to God in praise.”⁴

So now, my friends, let us thank the Lord our God with heart and hand and voices! And all God’s people said, “Amen!”

⁴ Brett Blair, www.esermons.com