

Thanksgiving Everyday - Always  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Philippians 4:4-9; John 6:32-35

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Our texts today are those suggested for Thanksgiving, and mesh well with our stewardship dedication.

Our Hebrew Scripture reading details how worshipers are to present their offerings of first fruits. The first cuttings from their fields are to be brought to the temple in an offering basket to be presented at the temple. Yet, one does not simply set one's offering down. There is a litany of remembrance one is to recite as one approaches. Molly will be reading the instructions for bringing the offering, and I will speak the words of the worshiper making the offering. Note particularly the post-offering celebration at the end of the reading.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11:

*When you 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, <sup>2</sup>you shall take some of the first of 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. <sup>3</sup>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.'*

*<sup>4</sup>When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, <sup>7</sup>we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup>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; <sup>9</sup>and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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.*

Our Philippians lesson passage is a joyful text that marks Paul's delight in this young church. Perhaps you learned the song based on the opening verse: "Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say rejoice. Rejoice! Rejoice! Again I say rejoice. Rejoice! Rejoice! Again I say rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say rejoice."

Yet, Paul calls for this rejoicing knowing there are “issues” in the church – earlier in the letter he has mentioned opponents, false teachers, and a dispute between two named church members. So, his words serve as encouragement in an anxious time. In addition, given he is writing from prison, his words also offer the Philippians evidence of what has worked for him in terms of praise, prayer and peace in hard situations.

Philippians 4:4-9:

<sup>4</sup>*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.* <sup>5</sup>*Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.* <sup>6</sup>*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* <sup>7</sup>*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

<sup>8</sup>*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* <sup>9</sup>*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

Finally, in John 6, Jesus has fed the 5000 and these fed people are following him. Concerned some are just miracle groupies, he seeks to differentiate himself as the Bread of Life. Two chapters earlier, Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well. He spoke of himself as living water and she asks for this living water. Listen to the crowd’s request for the Bread of Life in this morning’s lesson in John 6:32-35:

<sup>32</sup>*Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.’* <sup>33</sup>*For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’*

<sup>34</sup>*They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’*

<sup>35</sup>*Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’*

Some of you have already done it. Others strongly suggest it not be done. For me, the advertisements are intriguing. I even checked the price. For \$99 I can have my DNA tested to discover my ancestral roots going back thousands of years ago, way past the documented Northern European ancestry of our parents’ family trees. But that’s not all! Included in this price is a printout of how many variants I have to the Neanderthals. I am not really sure what that means, or if it is something one might want to frame to hang alongside family photos, or academic diplomas. The clincher is there is no blood draw, so no needle, just saliva. Imagine, your whole ancestral history made available for a good spit...and \$99.

Yet, the intrigue lessens when I realize, I am only going to receive a printout, a list of from what regions of the world my ancestors may have originated. There will be no names, no history, no stories.

A cousin in our family encourages people to spend less time on family trees, and more in writing family stories – not lengthy biographies, but highlights that would be of interest to future generations. In the Bible, there are family trees, called genealogies, perhaps the most familiar of which is that of Jesus in Matthew 1. His family tree is traced back to Abraham, through King David, to his parents, Joseph and Mary. Yet again, genealogies tell only a part of who we are.

In our Deuteronomy lesson, it is not names or a family tree, but the fullness of one's ancestral history that is to be remembered. *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor* is the opening line for the offering of firstfruits. Some translations have a wandering Syrian; either one refers to the ancestral home where Abraham and Sarah responded to God's call to form a new people.

This meant that when bringing one's offering, one was to recall close to 1,000 years of history, to claim it as one's own history, one's ancestral story beginning with the wandering Aramean. The term has a meaning of being lost, so one's story of wandering connects with being found, rescued, guided along the journey until one reached one's present land. From Egypt the people were rescued, led out, and eventually, God provided a land for them to possess and settle.

This long look back made me wonder if there is a danger, in our thanksgivings, of not reaching back far enough in our memories. We may think back two or three generations, though if we offer a prayer for our Thanksgiving meal, we may simply reprise gratitude for today's family, health, and without detail, give thanks for the comforts and securities evidenced on our shelves, in our closets and drawers, or detailed on our bank statements and portfolios. Such prayers often begin with, "Thank you God for..." and then we recite our list. Certainly it is good to give thanks, yet such prayers can too easily end up being more about us than God.

Deuteronomy calls us to offer our gifts and prayers as if it is all about God. The power of reaching back, past the boundaries of our immediate memory, is we can capture the story that is larger than ourselves. We lose any temptation for self-congratulation, for saying, "Thank you God, that I have made it on my own," or even, "God has blessed me," often based on our visible evidence of health or accumulation of wealth. By reaching back further in time, we begin to find God in the whole journey, even at those times when giving thanks was not on the tips of our ancestor's or our tongues. We can then affirm John Calvin's thought that God never forsakes us in the midst of a journey. [Feasting on the Word Year C volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 28]

Our Philippians lesson offers similar assurance God will never forsake: *the peace of God ... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*. As I shared at Friday's men's Bible study, Fred Craddock imagines God's peace as being a sentry on duty for us, to provide the protection that enables us to know peace, to be kept in peace in the midst of conflict. Again, Paul is writing to the Philippians about rejoicing when they are struggling with conflicts that do not induce joy. Just as the firstfruits offering is to be made as one recites one's history, Paul encourages them to continue to *in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let [their] requests be made known to God*.

Today, we make our firstfruit commitments to the life and ministry of this congregation for the coming year, 2017. We call them pledges for what is ahead. Yet, we are wise to do so also by looking back, further than we might think. Yes, we can trace this congregation's history back to its founding in 1961, but even for charter members, and those who first professed their faith in this place, all our histories extend back to before we were born. Our histories go back generations, past the last known relative on our family trees, though I don't know if we need to go back to the Neanderthals.

My point is our thanksgiving increases when we rehearse and repeat who brought us to this place, even if we do not know the names. I think what we will discover is that, even if Abraham and Sarah do not appear in our DNA history, we are still joined to them as wandering Arameans. And as Christians, we will note how we have been fed by the Bread of Life.

We remember who has given us the ability to make our offerings, to be generous in our pledges. Yet, most of all, when reach back past the limits of our memory, we will begin to see the journey has been all about God. As I wrote that, my mind went to the "Where's Waldo" books, where one was to find Waldo on each page, often in a crowd. I recall adults were as enthralled by the search as children. Similarly, as our grandson and I read Richard Scarry's Cars and Trucks and Things That Go, we seek to find the Lowly Worm character on each page. Sometimes it takes a while to find Waldo or Lowly Worm, but they are always there.

Finding God in our histories, in our journeys, even in our anxious times, prompts our thanksgiving and our response in our offerings and stewardship commitments, not just for the coming year, but as part of the continuing journey for years to come. We also are reminded that even as the people of Israel marked their possession and settlement of the land as a gift from God, the land was still God's. Growing up, I recall singing after our junior church offerings, "We give Thee but thine own, whate'er the gift may be. All that we have is thine alone, a trust O Lord, from thee."

Before reading our Deuteronomy lesson, I asked you to keep an ear out for the post-offering celebration. After presenting their basket of firstfruits, their commitments to 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.*

The offerings are meant for joy, for enjoyment, by the whole community. It's a potluck where all join in. It's a party! It's a Thanksgiving dinner. And God has created the guest list. The Levites, who did not have land, were given a share, along with the alien, also translated as the immigrant, the foreigner. And so, comes a final teaching: it is not thanksgiving if the table is not extended to welcome the stranger. Thanks be to God.