



THANKSGIVING SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

AT HARLEM,

NOVEMBER 27, 1862,

BY THE PASTOR,

REV. EZRA H. GILLET.



New York:

A. J. BRADY, PRINTER, No. 5 TRYON ROW.
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NOTE.

The author of this discourse, in reluctantly yielding to the request for its publication—which necessitated the writing out of portions which had been only mentally prepared—feels it due to those who heard it, to state, that while he believes he has succeeded in presenting every leading thought nearly in the precise form of its delivery, there are yet sentences, and a few paragraphs, struck out in the fervor of extempore speech, which he has been unable to recall. The discourse was prepared with no view to publication, and to this fact must a portion, at least, of its defects be credited.

E. H. G.

A SERMON,
PREACHED IN THE HARLEM PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
ON THANKSGIVING DAY,
NOVEMBER 27th, 1862.

PSALM L. 14. Offer to God thanksgiving, and pay thy vows to the Most High, and call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver . . .

AMID the clash of arms and the roar of cannon, we are called upon to give devout thanksgiving to God. There are bleeding hearts—there are sad homes around us—and for many the tones of praise and gladness must have a sound discordant to their feelings; and yet, even for them, there is occasion for thanksgiving. Our blessings wear, perhaps, a brighter hue when seen on the dark back-ground of public calamity and civil war. The contrast of the peaceful earth, and the clear, quiet heavens, is the more striking when earth quakes under the tread of armed men, and raging passions are ravaging and desolating the fruitful valleys.

I see *man* in the struggle of hostile passions. I see *God* in the rich, yellow harvest that feeds the famished millions; man burns the fruit of his own labor. Nature—at God's bidding—does what she may to replace it. When I look at men I see darkness and lowering clouds; when I look higher and beyond, I see God, the Sun of Righteousness, the Fountain of joy.

If we count up our mercies now—mercies granted us above and beyond our deserts—how soon are we overwhelmed in the attempt! Life—continued life—while so many that we have

known and loved have gone—and the places that knew them once shall know them no more; health and strength, while others pine on beds of suffering, or hobble along assisting their maimed limbs with staff or crutch; reason and sound mind, while some are driven to desperation, or have been forced to occupy the cell of the lunatic; intelligence and the means of knowledge, while millions are the victims of ignorance and mental darkness; food sufficient and healthful, while others—like the Lancashire operatives—are crying for bread; raiment to protect us against the wintry cold, while many a one shivers beneath his tattered rags; homes to shelter us, while others wander, even in our own land, houseless and exiles; quiet firesides, over which a benignant government and a kind providence keep watch and guard, while hundreds of thousands of our countrymen know only the life of the camp and the vicissitudes of the march and the battle-field; genial friendship and loving and trusted hearts that beat in sympathy with our own, while so many scarce know the name of friend, or think with sad hearts and gaze with tearful eyes as they turn toward homes far away; the rewards of our honest labor, even though scant, while in other lands, one may not be secure of his hard-won earnings; above all, schools and sanctuaries, and Sabbaths and bibles, and the voice of prayer and praise, all speaking to us of a world where there is no more sin nor sorrow, pain nor strife, and ever teaching us the way to that inheritance of the blest, where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.

For these blessings, and ten thousand more, small and great, that we cannot number, we should be base and ungrateful not to give thanks even in times like these. And yet, will not a true Christian philosophy go even beyond this, and note the blessings that are mingled with our griefs? Even in this war that is now upon us, he is blind who does not read in some of its darkest features the handwriting of the God of love. The blackest cloud has often its silver lining; a golden crown is

often fitted to the brow of the thunder-head, showing that a bright sun yet shines, and when the storm is past, clearer skies and purer air will come.

We are on our march now through the Red Sea and the desert of our history, and I think we have before us the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. We have seen an outbreak of national feeling, a spontaneous declaration of loyalty to constituted authority, for which we feel bound to give thanks to God. A conglomerate of nationalities, we have been welded together by common interests, sympathies, and institutions, into a unity that is admirable. It is a great thing to have a great people—differing, perhaps, from the administration that is over them—yet giving to it a loyal support. It is a great thing, amid the clash of arms, to have a little piece of paper—a printed constitution, a mandate of a judge—with nothing but an official signature to secure it reverence—commanding reverence—as if ten thousand or ten million men marched behind it. It is a glorious thing to have the great masses say with a grand unanimity: We abide by the law, and we recognize in the law the security we have for ourselves, our children, and for all that shall come after us. The shout, the huzza, that welcomes the national flag, as it is unfurled, indicates a brave and noble enthusiasm; and when that flag, wherever borne, shall carry with it liberation from fear and terror and stripes and imprisonment and bondage, so that it shall be hailed as a deliverer, as giving present and enduring security, the very prospect, the bare possibility, stirs the soul within us, and thrills our hearts beyond the note of drum or trumpet, or martial strain.

And who can forget, at a time like this, the generous devotion with which our brave soldiers have gone forth at their country's call, to fight, or to fall in its defense? The sight is a stirring and a noble one. Even in this hour of calamity it almost makes us forget our grief. Well may we cherish the memory of the fallen, who have fallen for us, and well may we cheer those that

survive that have gone forth to fight our battles. How came they by this enthusiasm? How is it that they love their country and will fight for it to the death? It comes from influences and institutions that have trained them to be what they are, and for which we are indebted to God. Thanks be to his name that he has given us such men to lay their lives a willing sacrifice on the altar of their country.

And what shall we say of the fathers and mothers that have surrendered the pride of their dwellings and beloved of their hearts, at their country's call?—that have responded a “God bless you,” “God speed you,” as with youthful enthusiasm they have exclaimed, “Kiss me, mother, and let me go?” It was brave—it was noble to do it. We owe them a lasting debt—nay, rather we owe it to God, who kindled their hearts to such self-denying enthusiasm, and taught them to render the sacrifice.

And amid the gloom of civil strife—amid all the dire scenes of the great tragedy, there are some things on which we fondly linger, and which shine forth brightly, grandly, from the gloom. I think of some that have fallen and have left behind them a noble testimony that has been spread abroad, and held up to their country's gaze. I seem to stand by the death-bed of one of the bravest of the brave—Mitchel—the Astronomer, the General, the *man*, the *Christian*, and I hear him whispering—for he is fast sinking—in low tones, “It is a blessed thing to have a Christian hope in a time like this.” Thanks be to God for such a testimony from a soldier's lips. And I might—if time would allow—cite other examples of the power of faith which gleams forth with cheering light in this night-time of sorrow and a nation's peril, which should stir our hearts to gratitude to Him who writes his autograph of love in rainbow letters on the darkest cloud.

And who does not see that the lessons we are learning, if we have not already learned them, are worth more than the millions

they cost, or the blood that furnishes ink to write them? When Dr. Alison, father of Alison the historian, preached a half century and more ago his Thanksgiving Sermon for Nelson's naval victory of Trafalgar, he said: "There is something in the opulence of nations which has been found hitherto hostile to national virtue; and amid the long sunshine of prosperity there is a malignant spirit of selfish interest apt to arise, which withers the proudest promises of national greatness." It is only too true. Years ago wise men foresaw, foretold, and feared the coming storm. We had become prosperous and proud. We had all the self-exaltation and self-glorification of the King of Babylon, when he said: "Is not this great Babylon that I have builded?" We were great and wanted to be greater. We glorified the Monroe doctrine. We talked of *manifest destiny*. We were fast coming, as a nation, to feel that we could push the bounds of right to the limits of our power. We were preparing to swallow nations at a meal, and surfeit, like the anaconda, on living victims, heedless of the lethargy sure to follow, or the demoralization that was inevitable. We forgot that we had enough to do to train and educate and christianize our own masses, and that this was a more direct road to enduring and healthful strength and prosperity, than the road by which armies march. We were overlooking the poor, the ignorant, the outcast, the degraded and oppressed. We were deaf to the cry of wrong, and blind to the sight of vice, immorality and injustice. Millions in our great cities—some rioting in wealth, others rotting in poverty, were sinking in godlessness, and we heeded it not. We took the stature of a man by the measure of his vote. Faction and party spirit were growing insensible to right and duty as well as consequences. We were on the high road to ruin—the very road by which Assyria and Babylon and Rome marched to perdition, and we scarcely perceived it.

I will not say that our course even now has been fully arrested, but it has been checked. We hear no more of *manifest destiny*;

we cease to talk of the Monroe doctrine. The sanitary, moral and religious wants of our soldiers have forced us to think of them as men, and of our duties to them. We are confronted with the dangers, and hardships, and hazards to which they are exposed, and a noble, Christian humanity has been evoked which has done something for their relief. We are coming to see that we have uses for money besides hoarding and squandering, and that wasteful luxury is alike unpatriotic and unchristian.

Another important lesson is taught us, as by the force of circumstances we are led to ask—how was this war initiated, or why does it linger indecisive? The answer is one to humble us, and to bring the consciousness of guilt home to us all. The nest-egg of treason in the National Capitol never could have been hatched but by the brooding influences of moral corruption. Had every loyal State sent to Washington men who should represent truth, and principle, and Christianity, secession would have never dared to look them in the face. Its plots and conspiracies became effective only by the guilty complicity of a corruption that could be bribed.

And what has stayed the march of our armies? Has not corruption leaked through every crevice and palsied the energies of the nation? Has not God been teaching us—"not by might nor by power, but by His Spirit"—the battle must be won? We must be honest and true—we must be strong in uprightness and integrity if we would finally triumph.

There are some men who suggest this, and others who suggest that, and who, with intensity of vision, can see but one thing, and think of but one, forgetful that sin is a Proteus, and is never to be crushed by destroying only one of its forms. We will not judge such harshly, for they may mean well; but when the Upas tree of sin is to be cut down, it is poor policy to fasten an axe to the end of a long pole, and at arms' length strike tediously and laboriously at some single branch, replaced, while it is hacked off, by another shoot that gives evidence of good pruning. The

divine method is to lay the axe at the root of the tree, to smite down the trunk and all its branches with it.

The good sense of the farmer or the gardener teaches us an important lesson. He goes into his field and finds it covered with various weeds, but instead of calling in the aid of botanical science to classify them, and studying which is most obnoxious, and then going over the field to cut down that particular one, overlooking all others, he takes his hoe and clears the ground as he goes forward. That is what we should do. We should use the Gospel hoe to cut down every weed, just as it comes in our way, and clear off everything that checks the growth of the standing corn in the garden of the Lord.

When we think of the iniquity of the world, it seems to us a kind of ocean, and we cannot hope to check its rising tides by sweeping them back at one particular point. We must begin by invoking the aid of the God of storm and tide, and we must be prepared to meet every overflow of sin at every point. Else while we stem one current of evil, and forget others, they will flow around us, and pour in upon our rear, and defeat all that we have accomplished. There is no specific for the world's sin, except Gospel reform that meets every phase of it. This strikes at the root instead of lopping the branches. It cuts up every weed instead of wandering about to exterminate a particular evil. What we want, what the nation wants, is better men—men who will do that which is just and right, and without these it is vain to rely on specifics or pour out vengeance on particular forms of sin to the neglect of others.

And who does not read—as the mantling clouds of smoke lift from our battle-fields—who does not read clearer and more clear in the light of blazing cannon, lettering their frowning folds, the admonition addressed to us as a nation, to put away every form of sin, and fortify ourselves anew by the manly virtues and the Christian morals of our fathers? What we want, to subdue the rebellion, is not more money, or braver sol-

diers, or larger armies, but truer hearts and loftier principle, and purer virtue, and heaven-taught minds to guide and inspire us. Who does not feel this in such a time as this? God in his providence is writing it out before our eyes.

On the evening of a Fourth of July, when the fire-works have been kindled, you have seen streaming through the smoke and darkness, in letters of flame, some national motto, some memorable name or date—WASHINGTON—or, 1776. How it thrilled your heart as it met your eye, and with a proud smile you thought of the fiery lesson it read out to the eyes of thousands of spectators. But who, in these grander fire-works of civil war, in these pyrotechnics of Providence, amid the boom of cannon and the tramp of the fire-wrapt columns, does not see letter after letter pre-arranged by a superintending hand, coming forth to view, and gleaming through the smoke and dust of the fray, till he reads, "Righteousness exalteth a nation," and spells out what made the King of Babylon to tremble, that there is a God that ruleth in heaven and doeth His will among the inhabitants of the earth.

Thanks to His name for the kindly-meant, though stern, admonition. We need it—we need it above everything else. Our sins are our curse, and our strength and wisdom are to forsake them. What we want is to make our people better. We want more power in the pulpit, more vigor in our Sunday schools, more efficient means to reach the masses, more active measures to circulate the Bible and the tract, and disseminate every form of religious truth. This is our proper work—which may God deign to bless.

Nor will we forget at a time like this, the cheering assurance of the text—"Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me." Thanks be to Him whose love gave utterance to the promise, and whose faithfulness will fulfill it. Our help is in God. He can effect our deliverance in ways

beyond our thought. He *can* do it, and he *will* do it, if we call upon him for help in the proper spirit.

And yet it may not be in such ways as we might imagine. His ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts. But we will at least praise him for the cheering hopes which his words inspire.

We will thank him also that we can trust all our imperiled interests in his hands. It is vain for us to attempt even to foretell the future. It may be that this nation is to be rent asunder. May God avert it! But one thing we all feel, that henceforth rebellion can never expect impunity, and that the stern authority of established government must not be trifled with; and one thing we devoutly hope, that the causes of the war, be they found where they may—in angry passions or selfish interests—shall be annihilated. If it is unsafe for this republic to hold in its bosom a sectional power, cemented into a conspiracy by the profits of the unpaid labor of millions of bondmen, and the war should result in its annihilation, I would not willingly believe that there is a loyal heart between the two oceans, that would not respond, “God’s will be done.” If what a Southern statesman has declared—in the face of the world and in insult to the light of the nineteenth century—to be the corner-stone of the Confederacy, should be ground to powder, few, I trust, would be envious of the martyrdom to be gained by thrusting themselves beneath the rafters of the falling fabric; and if, as the result of the war, the flag which we all have loved, which we love still, and shall love till we die, shall come forth stainless from the strife, all its stars undimmed, the symbols of our future to endure like the stars in heaven, while the stripes shall be emblems only of a past, stripes and retribution for rebellion, and this flag shall float in the light and breeze over a broad, peaceful, happy, free, regenerated land, then might we all be ready, with true Methodistic fervor, to exclaim—“Hallelujah, Amen!”

The issue is in God’s hand. It is well that it is so. Thanks

be to his name for it! It shall tend to his glory, though it humble us. Prostrate in the dust, under the stroke of his judgments, we will yet exalt his name. We cannot see how the rending asunder of this glorious heritage can work out results other than disastrous; but we have not God's foresight. We turn our eyes away from such an issue, and invoke an intervention that can baffle all the intervention of the nations, the false diplomacy of the world. We cannot help feeling that God has great designs in reserve for us. All our past speaks the guiding hand of his providence. Our fathers were trained under his stern tuition. Truer men never lived; braver men never fought; devouter men than many of them never prayed; wiser men never constructed a civilized and Christian State. Our hills and valleys are fragrant with memories of their sufferings and their valor. Where is the dwellings in city or forest, or the sea-shore or the mountain, that has not echoed to the name of Washington? where is the hamlet, the village, the sheltered nook, that has not been visited by breezes that have swept over Saratoga or Yorktown—that have eddied about the shaft of Bunker Hill or the grave of Mount Vernon? Where has knowledge been more widely or freely diffused? where has religion ever won more signal triumphs? Our lakes and rivers, do they seem designed to mock the littleness of the people that shall inherit them? Our Alleghanies and Andes, were they reared to pour scorn on the insignificance of the pigmies that should crawl at their base? Our broad prairies and teeming acres, do they seem designed to invite the culture of a despot's minions? It does not seem as if God suffered the iron wire to flash his lightnings across a continent, from ocean to ocean, just to show how many insignificant fragments of a great empire could be crowded within its span. Niagara's thunder was not meant to charm insects, nor the broad wealth of the Mississippi Valley as slime for worms to crawl in. Everything about us, from the soil we tread to the stars that light us—from our early conflicts

with savages to our present conflicts with traitors—from our forests to our mountains—from our log cabins that tell of pioneer energy, to our cities that garner the wealth of a world-wide commerce—from the “dim aisles of the deep wood,” their green arches echoing with the forest hymn, to the pillared temple built for the worship of generations to come—everything proclaims that this land—set by God’s hand in the framework of two oceans, and hung on the broad side of the world, and already with clouds of witnesses—from the firmament of its history gazing down in scorn for meanness, and applause for virtue—was meant for men—men true, faithful, large-souled, liberal, Christian—whose policy could span the world, and take into view the ages, and labor for the whole human race.

“ Our country, ’tis a glorious land,
 With broad arms stretched from shore to shore ;
 The proud Pacific chafes her strand :
 She hears the dark Atlantic roar,
 And nurtured on her ample breast,
 How many a goodly prospect lies,
 In nature’s wildest grandeur drest,
 Enameled with the loveliest dyes.

Great God, we thank thee for this home—
 This bounteous birthland of the free,
 Where wanderers from afar may come
 And breathe the air of liberty !
 Still may her flowers untrampled spring,
 Her harvests wave, her cities rise,
 And yet, till time shall fold his wing,
 Remain earth’s loveliest paradise.”

The ship of state is in the tempest now, but she yet minds the helm, and we cannot believe that she is to be a wreck. She is a noble vessel. Her keel was New England elm ; her knees were Puritan oak ; she was bolted with Pennsylvania iron, and in her construction, Yankee and Huguenot, English and Scotch, Dutch and Irish, wrought side by side—and though decked with Georgia pine and smeared with Carolina pitch—she had a sound hull, and through the Hellgate of Revolution God gave her a Washington for a pilot. Out upon the open sea she has fallen

into weaker hands and the storm is upon her ; but she is staunch yet and her crew are loyal, and though the storm has rent her sails and splintered her spars, and thrown her for a time almost on her beam ends, she is righting herself now, and meets the huge waves as they come, with a brave, bold front, bating no jot of heart or hope. Shall she be surrendered to the bands of pirates? Shall "the harpies of the shore" "pluck the eagle of the sea"?

"O better that her shattered hulk
Should sink beneath the wave,
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
And there should be her grave.
Nail to the mast her holy flag,
Set every thread-bare sail,
And give her to the God of storms,
The lightning and the gale."

But the God of storms will accept the consecration, and become Himself her pilot ; then shall she be safe, and over the waves of time's ocean shall she bear a rich and precious cargo to bless the world.