**Thanksgiving Eve**

**November 25, 2020**

**Text—Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

Well, 2020 sure has been an interesting year, hasn’t it? I should have known it was going to be bad when the Ravens completely blew it in the playoffs back in January. And how far we’ve come since then. We’ve been through a global pandemic, which is still ongoing. We’ve been through lockdowns, mask ordinances, economic downturn, and job loss. We’ve seen loved ones get sick with the virus and maybe even die, or perhaps we ourselves got sick at some point. Add to all that the crazy social unrest we’ve experienced: high profile police shootings, riots in the streets, destruction of property. We here in Springfield have been isolated from most of that, but it’s happened all over the country. And then we just went through yet another contentious election season, with yet another controversial outcome, and yet another large segment of our country that is very upset. Has 2020 been the worst year in recent memory? Other than 2001 with 9/11, I can’t think of another year in my lifetime that has had so many bad things happen. And I’m guessing that many of you can’t either.

And yet, here we are, celebrating Thanksgiving, that all-American festival of turkey, pumpkin pie, and NFL football. This is the time of the year when we’re supposed to be thankful for everything we have. We’re supposed to get together with our families and friends to celebrate the blessings that God has given us. But this year, it sure seems hard to do that, doesn’t it? There’s not a single person in this room that hasn’t been adversely affected in some way by everything that has happened this year. How can we give thanks to God when it seems like God hasn’t given us anything good? How can we be thankful when so many terrible things are happening around us, and to us? This year, how can we possibly go beyond the food and the football to capture the essence of what this holiday is supposed to be about?

Our Old Testament text for today gives us the answer to those questions. This passage from Deuteronomy explained to the people of Israel how to offer their firstfruits and tithes to their Lord when they took possession of the Promised Land. Not only were they supposed to bring their gifts, but they also needed to make a confession of faith in God’s graciousness to them. We find the words of this prayer of thanksgiving in verses 5-11. The Israelites were to recount the blessings that God had given them throughout their history. First, they were to talk about Jacob, the “wandering Aramean” who was the father of their people. He and his family went down to Egypt, and God blessed them there and made them into a great nation. But Pharaoh became afraid of them and enslaved them for four hundred years. The people of Israel then cried out to the Lord for deliverance, and he listened to them. He did powerful signs and visited terrible plagues upon Egypt, and then he brought them through the Red Sea to escape Pharaoh’s armies. And then, despite their grumbling and rebellion, he brought them to the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey, the land in which they would lack nothing. In response to all of these blessings, the Israelites would lay down their firstfruits and tithes before the Lord, giving him their best because he had given them his best. Regardless of what would befall the Israelites later on, these great works of God on their behalf would stand forever. If they remained faithful to him, they would always be his people, and he would be their God forever.

We Christians today can make a similar confession of faith, can’t we? No, we are not ethnically Jewish. We cannot claim to be descended from the people of Israel. But here is what we can claim. We can say something like this: “When I was born, I was lost, hopeless, and fatherless. Although I had an earthly family, I had no eternal family. I was destined for everlasting punishment because I was a sinner. But my Lord God had mercy on me. He sent his Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for my sin, and to rise again from the dead to grant me eternal life. I was baptized into Jesus’ name and had my sins washed away. He placed his name upon me and claimed me as his own. Now I am a child of God, a member of his church who will live forever with him in his kingdom. God constantly strengthens my faith through his Word and through the body and blood of his Son. I look forward to the day when Jesus will return, raise me from the dead, and renew the heavens and the earth.” This Christian confession of faith is not exactly the same as that of the Israelites in our text, but it is similar in many key ways. They were slaves to the Egyptians; we were slaves to sin. They were rescued from Egypt by God; we were rescued from sin by God. They were given the Promised Land to dwell in; we will receive the new heaven and earth to dwell in forever. So this prayer of thanksgiving serves as a model prayer for us Christians too. It reminds us of what God has done for his people, and what he has done for us specifically. It shows us that no matter how bad things may get in our lives here, we still have a Father who loves us and who has given us eternity in his glorious kingdom to look forward to.

So this is why we ought to continue to give thanks to God, despite the circumstances in which we find ourselves now. We can be thankful to him because his promises to us stand forever, regardless of how things may appear. He will not bring any adversity into our lives that we can’t handle, because we are his dear children whom he loves. So that raises the question for us then: how exactly should we be thanking God? Does it involve saying many prayers of thanksgiving to him? Does it simply involve a general attitude of thankfulness? Well sure. Those are certainly appropriate ways to thank God for his many blessings. But there are other things that we can do as well. And, as before, our Old Testament text will show us what some of those things are.

First of all, we can see from the text that the Israelites were to be bold about proclaiming the excellencies of God; that is, saying publicly what God had done for them. They were not only supposed to be quietly thankful or to say private prayers of thanksgiving to God; rather, they were to tell all the world about the gifts they had received from their Lord. The confession of faith that they were to make when they presented their gift was not a me-and-God type of affair; everyone could see and hear what the Israelites were saying and doing. Likewise, we Christians do not have a private faith. Our faith is meant to be shared with the world, so that all people would know what God has done for us and might receive those blessings themselves by trusting in him. This is one of the ways that we can be thankful to God: by sharing his Word with others and by so doing bringing more and more people into his kingdom. That’s what God really wants, isn’t it? He wants everybody to trust in him and be saved from sin and death. So just like with anyone else who does something good for you, we show our appreciation by serving them in return. And the best way that we can serve God is to proclaim his Word and help others to come to faith in him. The ancient Israelites did that when they presented their firstfruits and tithes; we Christians ought to do the same thing today.

And that brings us to the second way we can thank God that we find in our text: we can bring the best of what we have to offer to him. Of course, we all give offerings to God; everybody here puts something in the plate at least every now and then. But why do we do this? Why is it so important for us to give some of our resources to our Lord’s church? Oftentimes we’ll answer that question by referring to the budget and needs of the congregation: we can’t do ministry, run programs, or pay staff without money, so we need to give in order to support that work. Other times, we may think of giving as an obligation: God tells us to do it, so we have to. Those are legitimate reasons to give, but I wouldn’t say that they are the primary reasons for doing so. The most important reason why we bring our offerings to God is because we want to thank him for everything he has done for us. Think about it: how much has God really done for us? It’s so easy for us to look around at the world and think that God isn’t helping us very much right now. But nothing could be further from the truth! The fact that we have food to eat, homes to sleep in, and a church family like this reminds us that we have been blessed beyond all measure. We may be hurting right now emotionally, physically, or financially, but we can never forget all of the wonderful earthly blessings that we do have. And most importantly of all, we can never forget that God has saved us from sin, death, and the devil by the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus. He has forgiven our sins and given us the promise of eternal life with him. There is no greater blessing that he could ever give us. And because he’s given us so much, how could we not want to give him back a tiny fraction of our blessings, just to thank him? Good Christian stewardship is not only a matter of obeying God’s commands, but it’s also an appropriate way for us to express our gratitude to God for all of the things he’s done for us. If the Old Testament people of God could thank him by giving their firstfruits and tithes, then so too can we.

Let’s always remember that we have so much to thank God for. Let’s remember the materials blessings we have received from him. Let’s remember what he did for us through his Son Jesus Christ. Let’s remember that we are destined for eternal life in his kingdom. And let’s also thank him appropriately for everything he has done for us. We can have a general attitude of thankfulness, and we can thank him in our prayers, but let’s especially thank him by proclaiming his Word to others and giving him back some of the blessings he has given us. We can do no less for our Lord who has blessed us so abundantly. Even if you’re going nuts because of the COVID-19 restrictions, or if you know someone who has gotten sick or died, or if you’ve lost money or a job, or if you’re terrified about the unrest gripping our cities, or if you’re anxious about the way the country’s heading right now, you can still be thankful to God. You can be thankful because you know that he loves you, and that he will continue to care for you throughout this life and into eternity. You can be thankful because he sacrificed his own Son to save you from your enemies. And you can be thankful because he has promised to be with you at all times, no matter what may happen in your lives or in our community. He is here with us even now, strengthening our faith and giving us courage to overcome whatever challenges we may face. And so we will be thankful to him for everything he has done for us. We who have been granted so many blessings by God can do nothing else. Amen.