

Thanking God for Both Hard Times and Blessings

Sermon for Thanksgiving Day

Sermon Text: Deuteronomy 8:7-18



For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, ⁸a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, ⁹a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. ¹⁰And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. ¹¹“Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His rules and

His statutes, which I command you today, ¹²lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, ¹⁶who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. ¹⁷Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ ¹⁸You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may confirm His covenant that He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

At the Chartres Cathedral in France, there is a series of windows in the middle of the church which depict the Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekial, and Daniel as great giants. You can see the much smaller Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, who sit like dwarfs upon the prophets’ shoulders. The artist wanted to make it clear that the Gospel writers couldn’t stand alone but are embedded in God’s story of salvation. Without the Old Testament, they wouldn’t exist at all. If that was the case already with the Gospel writers, how much more with us, who exist in the here and now? Normally, people think that our life in this time is a measurement for everything else. We think that our lifestyle now is the normal situation for all people – but that’s not true. There were times when things were completely different. There were not just good times, but also bad times. And precisely in these bad times, people laid the foundation for our future with bitter tears. And that’s why we can live today. Yes, we modern people are not necessarily the most important and smartest of all time, but we always have people on whose shoulders we stand and to whom we owe our gratitude. There were people before us who labored for us, people who shaped us and influenced us. But it is not only important that we respect the generations and times before us, it is much more important that we see the history before and after us as God’s story with humanity. God wanted us and that’s why He made us! God also placed many people in our lives that helped shape us into who we are today. It is God’s story with us! This story, with all its highs and lows, doesn’t belong to us, but to God. Before the people of Israel went into the Promised Land and could enjoy the wonderful fruits of the land, they were to be reminded of this very thing. And for this purpose, Moses made a long speech. With this, Moses wanted to look into the story and remind the people of Israel that God was with them in the past – in the good times as well as in the bad times. What happened with Israel was not a coincidence. No, it was God who led the Israelites through the desert. It was God who determined everything like this and is still doing so today.

Today, we celebrate Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is for us to do exactly what the people of Israel did, which is: looking back at what has happened. We thank God that He made us the way we are today. We also thank God for saving and protecting us from so many dangerous situations. We also give thanks for our parents and forefathers. We

thank God for providing us with everything we need to live. But we don't just want to think about the good things, but also the bad things. When Moses spoke to the people of Israel, it seemed especially important to him to remember these bad sides of history. Moses very intentionally highlighted the wandering in the desert. There were many dangerous things, like snakes and scorpions, there was also famine and thirst. For the Israelites, it was probably not always easy to think about these things. This was not just because they were difficult times, it was also because the Israelites had repeatedly gotten into these terrible situations through their own fault. They were to think about these things so that they wouldn't make the same mistakes again. This Thanksgiving, we want to do just that and go back into history. In doing so, we realize that guilt is also a part of our reality today. We can see again and again in our personal life, as well as in the great history of humanity, that there have been mistakes, failures, and great guilt. These things extend into the present and determine the present time. Sometimes, history seems to have an overwhelming power that can no longer be changed. We can't simply say: "That was the past and therefore no longer applies to today!" People who died in a disastrous and unjust war can't simply be brought back. They are gone forever. We must not spare ourselves this crushing part of history either. Each one of us has made his own journey into the desert. Each one of us has his own guilt. Each one of us has his own terrible mistakes that, to this day, pile up before our feet like a big mountain blocking the future.

The Israelites knew these times. They remembered the wandering in the desert where there was nothing but sand – no water or food. And in such times, it was clear that death stood at the door. But it was precisely in such times that it then became clear again and again that God didn't leave the people alone. No, God was always the One who entered into human history. When people, out of pride and arrogance, decided that God would no longer exist and therefore made other gods for themselves, He initially allowed this to happen. Even though He gave the people this freedom, He didn't let them carry the consequences of their mistakes forever. Instead, He intervened in history and therefore saved people from themselves. Once, in miraculous ways, God let manna rain from heaven. The people of Israel should remember this wonderful salvation in the desert forever and talk about it. But they shouldn't just talk about the bread that came from heaven, they should remember that one doesn't need just bread to survive but needs, above all, the Giver of bread. People need God. In the presence of God, the heart of man is opened. Only in relationship to God can man understand his purpose. Looking at God, it was only then clear that people have a purpose and a future even in times of crisis and need. God wanted and wants a relationship with people and He doesn't just want this when things are going well for us, but also in times of crisis, even when our path leads into the desert and we can no longer see any hope. God wants to be with us then. And only then can we become free from ourselves and understand the big picture of world history. God wants to be a part of our story. It was like this in the Garden of Eden when God walked with Adam and Eve. And it remains so to this day. God wants to be by you. And where there is no hope, He wants to create something new! So we may stand before God with all our disastrous and hopeless history. Cry out to God! Weep even before God! Shout even... As long as we do these things before Him and not just stay within ourselves. Because it could happen that we, like the Israelites in our prosperity and with full bellies, forget that we need God at all. That would then be a desert wandering. A desert wandering without God. Without prayer! Without purpose!

The Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all talked about how Jesus Christ is the true Bread of Life. It was Jesus who healed all of the peoples' broken relationships. It is He who teaches us to prayer: "Father!" He is the One who speaks to us with creative power. "This is My Body... for you" and "This is My Blood...for you!" This is your God for you! And not only your God **for** you but your God **with** you! Amen.