



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THANKSGIVING DAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2019
DEUTERONOMY 26: 1-11; PSALM 100; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9; JOHN 6:25-35

THANKSGIVING DAY

John 6:25-35 [*When the crowd found Jesus on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 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. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."*]

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."]

Perhaps the best-known speech in American history begins: *Four score and seven years ago...* Lincoln delivered his famous Gettysburg Address on November 19, 1863, four months after the grueling Battle of Gettysburg ended in victory for the North, tipping the war's needle toward

its eventual outcome that would preserve the union and stake the claim to a moral compass Lincoln believed was envisioned by the Founders of the United States of America. Before blood was shed on the gentle hills of Gettysburg and Vicksburg that summer, it was not at all clear there

would be a Union still dedicated “to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

Of course, Civil War victory did not ensure equality for all, not by a long shot, but Lincoln knew in that fateful fall of 1863 that there was a purpose in creating opportunities for the nation to be unified.

So the next week, he declared the fourth Thursday of November to be a national holiday, a day of thanksgiving with unifying purpose. It is an executive order that has withstood the test of time, and the vagaries of the political pendulum ever since.

Of course, that was not the first Thanksgiving Day to be celebrated on this nation’s soil, only the first recognized nationally. The origins of the occasion are obscured by the lapse of time, and the mythic narratives have risen up to fill the gaps of certitude. There is something right about not knowing for sure, just acceding to the invitation to give thanks as a common cause, but it is an interesting historical exploration nevertheless, and perhaps there are lessons to be learned, so that Santayana’s aphorism—that those

who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it—might not prove out in our time.

There is evidence that Lincoln acted upon the encouragement of Sarah Josepha Hale, who had written to five presidents across two decades without success. Yet she persisted, and Abraham Lincoln finally addressed her concern and called for this national holiday. It’s worth noting that a woman who would not be given the right to vote in her lifetime figures prominently in our observance today.

Going further back, some would say that this holiday has roots in colonial New England, where pilgrims, as we’ve come to know them, gave thanks in 1621 with Indians in what most of us learned as schoolchildren was a feast of abundance. In recent years, revisions to that history suggest that it was the generosity of the tribes who provided much of the fare, effectively saving many lives from starvation in the harsh winter. By 1631, the observance would be codified on the Puritan calendar, with Indians being invited to Boston in reciprocal gratitude, or an upending of the power dynamic, we know not which, but could safely surmise

it was both. And two centuries after that President Andrew Jackson would unabashedly and cruelly strip all land titles held by indigenous peoples in the expanding United States, removing 60,000 first nations people from “this nation” across a trail of tears into detention centers in the Indian Territory.

More detailed records were kept in colonial Virginia, at Jamestown, where in early December 1619, the *Margaret*, a charter ship from Bristol, England, deposited 38 passengers onto the north shore of the James River, and the captain declared “that the day of our ships arrival...shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God.” Locals in tidewater Virginia have observed the holiday ever since.

There may have been similar observances of thanksgiving in the Spanish settlement of St. Augustine, Florida as early as 1598, where conquistadors and clergy brought their version of imperious expansion in the name of God, giving thanks to God along the way.

We could look even further back along the course of history to the English Reformation for the source code of this holiday. On the eve of that reformation, King Henry VIII, acting as Supreme Head of the Church of England, required that all citizens attend church service every Sunday plus 95 other “holy days.” Can you imagine? The reformers saw fit to cut that to 27 holy days, and Puritans in short order would trim that down to Christmas and Easter, and particular days set aside in response to some act of divine providence.

The Episcopal Church in this country has settled into a century-old rhythm of claiming this as both a religious and civic holiday, a major feast day of the church year. Were Henry VIII still king, we might have a church brimming with participants, even if not wholly enthusiastic about being here. I trust you are here of your own volition, for we hold these truths to be self-evident, that today, we give thanks for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Religion and politics intermingle here with common purpose—would that all people were afforded such unalienable rights.

Our scriptures today, of course, trace the trail of thanksgiving further back, to Jesus assuaging spiritual hunger as the bread of life, and to the ancient Israelites as they peered across a river valley into a land flowing with milk and honey, and in it all, we attribute the gifts as divine ones meant as blessings to our spiritual ancestors, and all who would follow them, including us here today.

Our collect makes the connection clear: gratitude is the natural response to God's abundant gifts, including the riches of creation which we are invited to enjoy. Enjoy—that is, to find joy in, and to celebrate as gifts, not to possess them or wrestle them from another's hand, but simply to align our hearts with the divine purpose that all the families of the earth should be blessed.

We were created to give thanks; we were created to sow the seeds of gratitude in our hearts and in our lives, to nurture it, not just on national holidays, but every day,

because God has called us into such a co-creative identity.

“It is for us the living,” as Lincoln wrote, “it is for us the living to be dedicated here to the unfinished work...to the great task remaining before us...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

And so we make our prayer today, with special intention on this holiday:

Almighty and gracious Father, we give you thanks for the fruits of the earth in their season and for the labors of those who harvest them. Make us, we pray, faithful stewards of your great bounty, for the provision of our necessities and the relief of all who are in need, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Happy Thanksgiving.

References

Some of the historical details here are drawn from memory, from Wikipedia article on Thanksgiving Day [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving_\(United_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving_(United_States)) and linked articles, and from resources available on the website of the National Archives <https://catalog.archives.gov/>