

November 20, 2011, Thanksgiving Sunday

Don't Forget!

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

The United States of America has traditionally been called a Land of Opportunity, a place where everyone can have a chance to make a good living and maybe even become rich. A place where everyone can succeed—where natural resources are abundant, the soil is fertile, and anything is possible.

And so historically people came from other countries, from places where there was oppression or famine or poverty, coming to a place where a better life was possible.

And people are still coming, because the United States is still a place of great wealth and opportunity, and even though there are in fact hungry, homeless people in this country, our average standard of living here is almost unbelievably higher than a lot of other places on this planet.

We can say, echoing the writer of the book of Deuteronomy,

“For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.”

Throughout the Bible, we read of the abundance of God’s blessings, of the abundant life that God desires for us to have, and how God provides for people over and over and over again----with the promise of a land of milk and honey, with the abundance of Egypt under the control of Joseph in a time of great famine, with manna in the wilderness, and so much more.

These stories of God’s care and providence are found in the Torah, which is the first five books of the Bible---Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They are found also in the historical books---Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, etc. They are recorded in poetry and song in the Psalms. They are recorded as well in the writings of the prophets---Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, and all the rest.

The Jewish people were told time and time again to remember all that God had done for them and to teach the stories to their children and their children's children, and throughout all generations.

The Jewish holy days are in fact part of this remembrance. Passover, Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, and the others are times when Jewish people commemorate what God has done for them and they celebrate that history of blessings.

For us, the entire New Testament is a recording of God's great care and providence. God holds nothing back from us, not even Jesus Christ, the only begotten son. When we read the Gospels, we read of how God is involved in our lives, and that involvement continues on today.

I think that all of us can testify to the many blessings that God has given us, blessings that range from family and dear friends to a warm home and a job that enables us to care for our family.

This past week I heard testimonies from people in our congregation about how God has blessed them. These testimonies told about miraculous

answers to prayer and God taking care of every need in times of great stress and financial difficulty.

One testimony witnessed to the way that God put just the right person in a woman's life to save her from addiction and another told about a woman's complete assurance that God loves her very much.

I know that there are many more stories of blessings here in this room. Blessings on blessings, shaken down and spilling over, cups overflowing.

What I worry about, though, is that there are times when all of us take God's blessings for granted, and that at times we take the credit for them ourselves, instead of giving glory to God.

This concerned the writer of Deuteronomy as well, and we can hear the same message today ----

“¹⁰When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. ¹¹ Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands and his laws and his love and care for you!

“ Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you move into nice houses and settle down, ¹³ and when your possessions fill up your houses and spill over into storage units and you bank accounts get bigger and all you have is more than you used to be able to imagine,

then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of a life of scarcity and into a life of having enough and to spare. God led you to this time and place through hard times and good times, through struggles and sacrifice, through dangers and illness, and God will continue to lead you through everything, whether it is good or bad.

When things looked the worst, God gave you hope and met your deepest need. He provides for you every day and in the darkest night. You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me. I have worked hard for everything I have.”

“But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth. This is our covenant with God, that he provides

us with abilities and gifts and talents and resources, and our response is to use the gifts and talents and resources to have life abundant.”

God has given us everything good that we have, including our ability to produce wealth!

We cannot forget to thank God! To forget is to put ourselves in God's place---that we can do all these great things for ourselves without God's help. This is idolatry! It is disobeying the Greatest Commandment, which is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength!

After our lectionary passage ends, the writer of Deuteronomy continued on with a serious warning----If we forget God, we will certainly be destroyed!

So don't forget! Don't forget to be thankful to God for all that we have been blessed with---abundant food, nice houses, and the strength to obtain wealth!

In our Gospel reading this morning, we heard about Jesus healing ten lepers, and only one came back to give God praise and to thank Jesus! The one that came back was not even Jewish. He was a Samaritan, a member of a mixed race that Jews looked down on.

Why do you suppose he came back? Jesus had told all ten to go show themselves to the priests, and only one did not forget to say thank you!

It was the custom then for people who were cured of leprosy to show themselves to the priests to verify that they were clean and could worship in the Temple again. After they showed themselves to the priests, they were once again acceptable in society. They didn't have to live outside of town by themselves anymore!

So the Jewish people who were healed were following the custom as well as doing what Jesus told them to do. But the Samaritan would not have been welcome in the Temple. To him, the Temple was not a holy place. Samaritans worshipped God on the mountain, not in the Temple!

The priests would have turned him away, so the only thing he could do was turn right back around as soon as he saw he was healed and tell Jesus “thank you” and give God praise!

The other nine kept on going to the Temple to show the priests. They could have stopped and said “thank you” first, but they wanted to get certified as being clean! So they forgot to tell Jesus “thank you.” Does that mean that they were doomed? That God would destroy them?

I don’t know the answer to that. Chances are good that they praised God when they got to the Temple. The problem was that they did not go back and give Jesus any gratitude.

Jesus told the Samaritan, “Your faith has made you well.” Does that mean the other 9 weren’t made well? Scripture clearly says that “As they went, they were made clean.” It doesn’t say anything about their disease returning.

So in what way did the Samaritan’s faith make him well?

I think Jesus meant in terms of the man's recognition of who Jesus is. The man gave glory and praise and thanks to God, and he also gave thanks to Jesus!

When I hear that his faith made him well, it indicates to me that he understood that Jesus was doing God's work and that he is the Son of God!

That's faith. To know that God is with us, touching our lives, healing us of our brokenness, restoring us to wholeness in our relationship with Him.

And so the Samaritan said "thank you." And not just said it, but threw himself at Jesus' feet!

The other 9 might have said "thanks be to God" when they got to the Temple, but they missed their chance to say it to the incarnate God, Jesus.

They missed their chance! Are you missing your chance? Is there anything you have been taking for granted? Anything you take for granted or take credit for, because you work hard for it? Don't forget that God gave you the ability to work hard. God gave you the ability to do all the good things that you do.

What is it that you are grateful for today? What blessings has God given to you? All of the good things in your life are blessings from God. Don't forget to say "thank you" and praise God, who is good all the time!

But what about times when everything goes wrong? I spoke with a friend of mine the other day. She was almost killed last March when a car hit her as she was riding her bike. She sustained multiple injuries. Most of them are healing well, except her right shoulder. Then last month she fell and broke her left elbow. In the meantime, her job with the county has been eliminated due to budget cuts.

My friend has four children ranging in age from 13 down to 6. She is trying to get certified as a teacher so she can find another job, and then all of these things happened to her.

A week from Monday she will have surgery to repair her shoulder and once again she will not be able to drive a car for a while, through the entire Christmas season.

Where is the blessing in all of this? How is God taking care of her?

What is it that she should be thankful for?

That is what we talked about.

She is thankful that her children are healthy and strong and growing. She is thankful for a devoted husband who has a wonderful sense of humor and who takes care of her as well as he can.

She is thankful for friends who help her out and who pray for her, although the prayers she asks for now are to get off the prayer chain!

She is thankful for her church family and for fellowship and a time and place to worship God. She is thankful that she has been able to find ways to serve God even when she is physically limited in what she can do.

For myself, after speaking with her, I am thankful that God has given her a positive attitude and a spirit of hope that the future will be better for her.

She has not forgotten all that God has done for her! She does not forget to say "thank you!"

And so once again, I ask you---what is it that you are grateful for? How has God blessed you?

In your relationships? In your job? In your family?

Financially? In where you live? In your prayer life and in your soul?

What has God done for you?

And how do you say “thank you”? Do you just say it, like a little kid whose parents say “Now what do you say?” and it comes out of the mouth as a reflex? Or do you throw yourself at the feet of Christ, saying it with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength?

All good gifts around us are from God.

Let us thank God with everything that we are! Amen!