

Date: October 13, 2024 (Thanksgiving)
Title: “Giving Thanks—Then and Now”
Text: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Last Sunday afternoon, Brenda and I went down to Rath Trevor Park for a walk. It was such a beautiful afternoon that we decided, after a while, to just sit on a log for a few minutes and enjoy the scenery. As we’ve done many times over the last 3 years, we quickly found ourselves marvelling over the fact that we *live* here. We don’t have to get on a plane or ferry at the end of the day to go back to “wherever our *real* home is”: *this* is our home! Parksville is far-and-away the nicest place either of us has ever lived.

That was pretty much how Moses figured the children of Israel would feel, too, about their new home in the Promised Land. At the point he was talking to them in today’s first reading, they hadn’t even taken possession of that home yet. But as he says in the opening verse, he wanted to help them prepare, ahead of time, for what they would do “**when they [finally] entered the land that the Lord their God was giving them.**” (1)

There are two things in particular Moses encouraged them to do. First, he wanted them to look back and give thanks for God’s faithfulness to them in the past. Then he also anticipated them giving further thanks for the fresh set of blessings they were just going to be starting to enjoy, as they entered into that “**land flowing with milk and honey**” that the Lord was giving them. (9)

Looking-back, you see, was an important way honouring and making sense of the past. Moses only just summarizes that past, very quickly—but as you may remember, it was quite a dramatic story. Their history as the household of God had started way back with Jacob, who isn’t identified here by name (in this short little summary) but is simply called “**a wandering Aramean.**” (5) No kidding! Maybe you remember: After Jacob tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright, he fled from the land of Canaan (where he and his family had been living) to a place called Paddan Aram (which is the western part of Syria, today). After living there for a while with his uncle Laban, and marrying Laban’s daughters Leah and Rachel, Jacob eventually took off again, back to Canaan—and then, toward the end of his life, he wandered still farther down to Egypt as well.

Moses doesn’t *expand* on this here in this reading, but the reason Jacob and his family wandered down to Egypt was because of a great famine. (5) The Egyptians had plenty of food, so Jacob and his family settled there—and (as we heard) they eventually “**became a great nation, powerful and numerous.**” (5) Over time, though, the Egyptians turned them into slaves—“**treating them poorly, making them suffer, and subjecting them to harsh labour.**” (6) That’s when the Israelites “**cried out to the Lord, the God of their ancestors.**” H “**heard their voice, and saw their misery, toil, and oppression.**” (7) And because he loved them so much, he “**brought them out of Egypt—with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm!**” (8)

That was the position these people were in, when Moses gave them this little speech here in this reading. The book of Deuteronomy is a *set* of speeches, you see, that Moses gave while he and the Israelites were *waiting* to make their *second* water-crossing—through the waters of the Jordan River into the Promised Land. The reason they *had* to wait is because of the attitude problem they developed, after God brought them through their *first* water-crossing, at the Red Sea. They were tired of the food, tired of being thirsty, and tired of wandering around from place to place. That’s where this speech came in. The best way to get them all to settle down (Moses realized), was to take their attention *away* from the present—by looking *back* to the past (so they could remember who they were), and then also by looking *ahead* to the future (so they could remember where they were going).

That's a good pattern for us to follow today too, this Thanksgiving weekend. For us too, what God has done for us in the past, shapes our identity. What he promises to do in the future, shapes our hope!

So: what do *you and I* see, when we look back to the past? A lot of things, right? God has brought each of us here on our own path. Geographically, we too have done a lot of “wandering” all over the place. So, humour me here for a minute (I'm curious!):

- Is there anybody here today who was actually born right here in Parksville?
- How about Oceanside more generally? (Coombs? Errington? Hilliers? Qualicum?)
- How many of us were born on Vancouver Island?
- Elsewhere in BC?
- How many of were born in another province (but still here in Canada)?
- How many were born in a different country altogether?

Very interesting, eh? In some ways, this is probably our most obvious connection back to this reading. This gorgeous place we find ourselves living in right now is *not* our homeland, but a place God has graciously *brought* us to, and *blessed* us with the opportunity to live in.

Even so, even more than the geographical wandering we've gone through to get here, it's the *troubles* we've endured along the way, that give us an even greater reason to thank God, as we look back and remember the past.

Maybe that seems like an odd thing to say. Many of us would probably rather *forget about* our troubles, than *give thanks* for them. But Moses talks quite a bit here in this reading about “**misery, toil, and oppression**”; he acknowledges that the Israelites had “**been treated badly,**” and gone through times of “**suffering and crying-out.**” (6-7) Well, for us too, many of us are survivors of pretty nasty situations in the past that continue to affect us deeply. Not just our bodies, but our minds, emotions, and spirits have been damaged in ways that deeply trouble us. If that's true for you, then (for sure!) remembering the past may be an especially awkward and difficult thing to do.

But even so—here we are, right? We're *here!*—and not only because we ourselves are so resilient, tough, and courageous. That might be part of it, but the deeper reason you and I are still here is because “**the Lord has heard our voice, seen [our troubles], and brought us out of Egypt, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.**” (7-8) The specific *ways* in which God has done that for each of us, vary as much as the troubles themselves that each of us has seen. *So many things could* have happened, to *keep* us from being here today. But they didn't! We *are* still alive, we *are* still together with other Christians, we *are* still able to gather in this place to worship and give thanks to God. That's the first great thing to thank God for, here on Thanksgiving weekend.

The second part of Israel's thanksgiving that we can share in, grows out of something Moses only *anticipates* here in this reading—and that is, the blessings that God was *right on the verge of giving* to these children of Israel, whenever it was that he was finally going to let them enter that land he had promised, so long before, to give them. As you maybe noticed, Moses looks ahead to that time with so much confidence, that it sounds like it's already arrived. “**When you have entered the land that the Lord your God is giving you**” (Moses says), “**this is what you need to do.**” (1-2) It's totally matter-of-fact, as if he can already see in his mind's eye exactly how this thanksgiving he's looking forward to, is going to unfold.

Notice how *concrete* and *physical* Moses envisions the Israelites' thanksgiving being. “**Take some of the firstfruits of everything you produce**” (he says), “**put it in a basket, then go to the place the Lord your God will choose to be a dwelling for his name.**” (2) He doesn't even know where that place is going to be! But wherever it is, Moses sees very clearly what God's people ought to do there. It isn't enough for them to just thank God in their hearts. No,

they also needed to him worship together, with others, in an organized form of worship. **“Take some of your firstfruits,”** Moses said, **“and go to the place the Lord chooses as a dwelling for his name, and place your offering before the Lord your God, and bow down before him.”** (2, 10)

What does all of that mean for us? Well, I think there are several points of application you and I can draw out of this reading, to help us frame, fill, and inform our thanksgiving today.

First, we also ought to begin by appreciating *all* the ways the Lord has blessed us in the past. Sometimes all we really remember to thank him for is “our *stuff*.” And OK, that’s part of it. Here in this reading, what Moses envisions God’s people thanking him for certainly does include **“the firstfruits... from the soil of the land.”** (2)

But that isn’t where the *prayer* Moses wants them to pray, *starts*. It doesn’t start with stuff, but with all of the ways God had rescued his people in the past (so they could *enjoy* that stuff). That’s a good reminder for us too. As Jesus says in today’s Gospel reading, **“life does not consist in an abundance of possessions!”** (Luke 12:15) Instead, our best thanksgiving begins when we too look back over all the ways God has *rescued* us from all the hardships and troubles we’ve faced. There are so many of them in our lives too: illnesses, family troubles, financial problems, you name it. Along with all of that, we’ve gone through *spiritual* catastrophes too, that have totally knocked us sideways, and disrupted everything between ourselves and God. As Paul reminds the Christians in Rome, we too were once **“in slavery—to sin”!** (Rom 6:17) Like Israel in Egypt, there was no way we could ever “work ourselves out of that slavery.”

But now, Paul reminds us: This is the good news—**“though you used to be slaves to sin, you have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you are committed. You have been set free from sin!”** (Rom 6:17-18) God, in other words, did *not* just leave us there in Egypt, to figure out how we could get ourselves free. Instead (as Moses said about Israel), God has **“brought [all of us Christians] out of [our captivity to sin] with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm”**—through the death and resurrection of Jesus our Saviour! (8) He has paid for all of our sins through his death on the cross, and opened a path into heaven through his rising from the grave on the third day.

Because Jesus has done all of that for us, you and I are (already now) heirs and future residents in the Promised Land. Our is a different Promised Land than the one Moses was talking about here in this reading. It’s *not* a chunk of real-estate in the Middle East, but a vastly richer and far more satisfying homeland in heaven. The book of Hebrews talks about this difference in several ways.

- **“Here on earth,”** it says, not even God’s *first* chosen-people, Israel, **“have an enduring city—but we [who are Christians] are looking for the city that is to come.”** (Heb 13:14)
- Israel’s *true* **“inheritance,”** we’re told, was *not* the **“milk and honey”** of the Canaanite countryside, but **“the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”** (Heb 11:10)
- And so, the place where God’s people will worship him forever is not the literal **“Mount Zion”** that still stands, there in Jerusalem. That *was* the place that **“God chose to be a dwelling for his name,”** back in Israel’s time—but now, as the book of Hebrews puts it, we who are Christians **“have come to [a different] Mount Zion—the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.”** (Heb 12:22)

In a sense, then, you and I really do enjoy the best of both worlds. We live in **“a land flowing with milk and honey”** both physically *and* spiritually. Our *eyes* can feast on the scenery of beautiful places like Rath Trevor. Our *stomachs* can feast on rich and abundant food (like many of us will be enjoying later today). And right alongside those blessings, you and I can also look forward to the even-more-abundant blessings of the Promised Land that *we* stand right on the

culmination of entering—whenever the time comes for us to “cross over the Jordan” and enter into our true spiritual home, with the Lord and all of his people in heaven.

That’s what has always moved Christians to give God their *deepest* thanks—not just once a year, but every day. Like Moses on the day that he wrote these words (here in this reading), you and I too are poised, every day, on the border of the Promised Land—in between the two most significant crossings, or passages, we will ever face.

One of those crossings is already finished. The Lord has already brought us (spiritually speaking) through the *deep and deadly* waters of the Red Sea, at the time of our baptism. Our sins (in a way) are like those Egyptian soldiers who were chasing after God’s people, trying to *keep* them locked-up there in slavery. Not only did those Egyptians totally fail to do that, but they themselves were drowned in the Red Sea! In our case, it was our sins that were drowned, on the day our baptism. **“You were washed,”** Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth; **“You were sanctified, you were justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”** (1 Cor 6:11) Our sins cannot threaten us anymore. *They* have been drowned and killed with Christ. That’s why so many of us Christians put so much emphasis on our baptism. It’s the place where our sins were drowned, so they have no power at all to enslave us anymore.

And one day, God will bring us too through that second great crossing that still lies ahead. None of us knows *when* that day will come, when God will carry us “over the Jordan” into the fullness of the Promised Land. But because Jesus has already crossed-over that river of death, ahead of us, we can be sure that that day *will* come. **“I have gone to prepare a place for you,”** Jesus told his disciples in the Gospel of John. **“And if I have gone to prepare a place for you, I will certainly come back and take you to be with me, so that you also may be where I am.”** (John 14:2-3)

There’s *so much*, then, for us to thank God for, as we gather here today in this place where he has chosen to meet us—in the middle of our journey.

- Looking back, we can be thankful that he has rescued us from so many troubles all along the way—including the deadly peril of our sins.
- Looking around, we can be thankful that we live in such a wonderful area, physically speaking, and enjoy such spiritual confidence and hope because of Jesus.
- Looking ahead, we can look forward to entering God’s *ultimate* Promised-Land, which Jesus has already crossed-over-into, ahead of us, and will one-day carry us safely into as well.

As St. Paul says, at the end of today’s second reading: **“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”** (2 Cor 9:15) In the name of Jesus: Amen!