

Thanksgiving Observance

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

October 10, 2021

And you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there.
Dt 26:2

The Cycle of Thanksgiving

Dear brothers and sisters: grace to you and peace from

God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.



Our text is from the Old Testament reading for this observance of Thanksgiving, in the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy. This is of course the last of the five books which comprise the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Old Testament, and the name Deuteronomy comes from a Latin word which means “second law.” That title gives us some insight into what is happening in these chapters, for the entire Book is a recapitulation or restatement of the covenant God had made with the Israelites. Moses is going to die, he will not see the promised land given to the people, but before he dies he will once again recount the many blessings that the people have received from God, and he will once again speak the Law that they are to follow, and he will once again speak of the obedience in which they are to walk.

Along the way there are points in time when the people are to take time out from their daily busy-ness and re-engage in their sacred history through a ritual act of thanksgiving.

This is what we hear of today in our reading, a specific time of thanksgiving and offering. This takes the form of bringing forth the “first of all the fruit of the ground”¹ and bringing it into a place “that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there.”² Moses here is looking forward, for this was to take place after the people had taken possession of the land which the Lord God has promised to give them, “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”³ He will not be joining them. When they get there, after the harvest, the people are to come and present their offerings through the Levitical priests in order to acknowledge that the Lord God is the source of all that they have received. He is the source of their deliverance. He is the source of the promised land, the inheritance that the people have.

The act of thanksgiving is therefore one of offering and remembrance, or confession. The people are told, “you shall make response before the LORD your God.”⁴ The offering and confession are a consequence of the initiative which the Lord God has showered upon the people. He even gives them the content of this confession in His very Word. Here it is: “A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he

1 Dt 26:2.

2 Dt 26:2.

3 Ex 3:8.

4 Dt 26:5.

brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”⁵

The confession begins with Jacob, the “wandering Aramean,” so named because his mother was an Aramean, and Jacob wandered in his pastoral vocation. The promised land was his by promise, but not by fact of possession. Fast forward to the Exodus when the Lord God would deliver His people out from under the harsh hand of Pharaoh. Now they are brought into the land that was promised to the generations before them, now they have the bounty of the blessings which were heard of and told down through the generations. Now the pattern of life that is set before them is woven into the cycle of planting and harvest, so that they will not look back upon the mighty works of the Lord God with indifference and ingratitude but will instead remember. They will remember that what God has done is not their work. The land is not theirs. They didn’t earn it, they didn’t buy it, it’s God’s gift to them. It’s a fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham, carried along by the Patriarchs down through Isaac and Jacob and Joseph, and they will cross over the Jordan to take possession of this inheritance. And when they get there they will bring forward their gifts with thanksgiving, in an act of worship, and they will once again confess the Words that the Lord God gave them to say in this new creed. And there’s even more: in the very act of this thanksgiving liturgy, offering and confession, God promises that He will “make his name to dwell there.”⁶ Whenever the people do this in remembrance of His mighty deeds, His name will be proclaimed, and He will be with His people.

⁵ Dt 26:5–9.

⁶ Dt 26:2.

This is the liturgy of thanksgiving – giving a portion back to the Lord God of what He has blessed us with. We are gathered together in our observance of Thanksgiving today to follow the same liturgical pattern, and to make our own confession. And God promises to be with us right here today in the Divine Service, bringing forth the wonderful gifts that we receive, without merit or worthiness of our own. Today we take a small part of what God has given us and we give it back in our offering. On this day we represent the rich bounty He has blessed us with in all the things we see around the chancel, to remind us of the abundance God has given to us in this country, in a world where so many have none of these things. And we bring forth our praise and thanksgiving. In this way we are joined together in the same cycle of offering and confession. We hear it in our prayer of thanksgiving before we receive Christ’s very body and blood, for we are “Gathered in the name and the remembrance of Jesus” to receive the salvation won for us on the cross.

You see, like the people who came up out of Egypt we too have been in bondage. In our case the bondage is to something even more sinister than the Pharaohs of Egypt. Sin is the weight that makes the stones of the pyramids seem like pebbles, for the weight of sin is death. We need rescue from that bondage, we need a Saviour who will lead to the place where death can no longer harm us, where the devil no longer has purchase on us. So God sent His only begotten Son to die for us, in order that we might be set free, in order that we might be delivered into the promised land of the forgiveness of sins, and have eternal life. In your Baptismal waters you were surely brought onto that shore, just as the people of ancient Israel were brought through the waters of the Jordan into the land of milk and honey. We are here therefore to make thanksgiving and confession. We are

here to once again listen to the Gospel promise, to make our confession once again in the words of the Creed, and to receive the very Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in the sure and certain faith that He is here for us, in order to forgive and strengthen us. Through the preaching of the Word, through the Sacraments which are administered according to the institution of our Lord, the Lord God makes His name to dwell among us here in Christ Lutheran Church.

Of course for the ancient Israelites we know what happened to the people in the promised land. Sadly they began to forget about God and His blessings, they began to turn away from thanksgiving and confession. Having been brought out of one bondage they would fall into another, a slavery to their own passions and idolatries as they began to look and act more like the people of Canaan than the people of God. This would be their story for generations to come, a cycle of sin and repentance. The battle still rages. Sin still holds us in its grip, and like them we are inclined to hold too tightly to the things in the world around us, to forget about God and His grace we have in Christ Jesus, to neglect thanksgiving and confession. The devil in there to fan the flames, to cause doubts in our minds as to whether God will really care for us, whether His promise really are sure and certain. Even though we experience God's abundant care for us we have this tendency think that it's not enough. Sin always curves in on ourselves, and we look away from Christ, and we start to think that what matters are things in this life, just like the rich fool in the parable we heard in the Gospel.

So our battle is also one of sin and repentance. Thanks be to God that His saving work

continues to this day. In our confession we say back to God the Words that He has given us, how He has saved us through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, but then we also confess that even today we are renewed in faith by grabbing hold of the promise. “With repentant joy we receive the salvation accomplished for us by the all availing sacrifice of His Body and Blood on the cross.” The cycle of blessing and thanksgiving we learn about in the ancient text of Deuteronomy points directly to the cycle of blessing and thanksgiving for which we gather in the Divine Service. His name dwells here because we are gathered in His name to receive His blessings. So as we gather with friends and family on this weekend of Thanksgiving to rejoice in the many blessings we have in the here and now, let us always remain ever mindful of the source of these blessings, and ever mindful of the even greater gifts that He provides. Let us therefore proclaim in one voice with St. Paul: “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!”⁷

And now the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

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✠ Soli Deo Gloria

⁷ 2 Co 9:15.