

21 November 2018
Eve of National Thanksgiving

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Let Us Bless the Lord!”

Text: Deuteronomy 8:1-10; Philippians 4:6-20; Luke 17:11-19

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sand. Wilderness. Rocks. Nothingness. That’s what they had seen for the last 40 years as they wandered about. It was their fault - or their fathers’ fault - that they had to do so. They didn’t trust God. That He would give them the land He had promised to give them. The people there looked so big and so strong! Their hearts had melted in fear. God had defeated Pharaoh and the Egyptians. He had divided the Red Sea. He had brought them this far . . . why hadn’t they trusted? Why were their eyes more persuasive than their hearts? And their doubts and fears bigger than their faith? They paid for that. 40 years.

But now, they had a second chance. The 40 years were past and they were again on the border of the Promised Land. And Moses repeated the same words they heard so many years ago: *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, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a 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. And you shall eat and be full . . .* How good it sounded! They could eat fruit! They could build homes. They could rest. They would trust this time. This time, they would believe.

God had not abandoned them those 40 years. He fed them. Daily bread. Manna. He gave them water from a rock that followed them around. And their clothing and shoes did not wear out. The hand of God for sure. And so, Moses said, *you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you*. It sounds like what we hear in the liturgy so often: *Let us bless the Lord!* And we respond: *Thanks be to God!*

Thanks. Thanksgiving. The pilgrims made it popular, but Israel maybe held the first Thanksgiving feast. There in the Promised Land, with food they hadn’t eaten for so long. The pilgrims escaped persecution; Israel escaped slavery. The pilgrims sailed for months; Israel wandered for 40 years. They would be thankful, for sure. But don’t forget, Moses seems to be saying. To bless the Lord. To thank the Lord.

They needed the reminder. God had cared for them for 40 years, but how often instead of thanksgiving, had they grumbled and complained? Too often. They took God and His

gifts and His care for granted; they grumbled like spoiled children. Odd, no? Doubting God one moment, then taking Him for granted the next. What a jumbled, mixed-up faith they had! But God was consistent. Yes, He tested them, and disciplined them when they needed it. But He never let them down. Not once. They couldn't say the same.

What about you?

Today is a reminder to us, as Moses reminded Israel, to bless the Lord. To thank the Lord. For we forget, too. Maybe take God and His care and His gifts for granted, too. And maybe we've even grumbled a time or two. When things aren't as we want them to be; when things don't turn out as we want them to; or not as quickly as we want. When what we need is the discipline we don't want. Good for us, then, that God is consistent. And faithful to all His promises. Even when, like Israel, we act like spoiled children.

But thanksgiving isn't just about doing what we should be doing. Today isn't about scolding us into being good and thankful children. Thanksgiving is what we *need*. It is good for us. It keeps us focused on the Giver and His love.

That's why we need a reminder. Not just once a year, with a holiday, but every Sunday in the liturgy. Moses' words reminding us to ***bless the Lord*** who is merciful and gracious to us always - even when we don't realize it. And with mercy that perhaps doesn't always seem like mercy. That's why Paul said in the words we heard tonight: ***but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.***

The peace of God. The peace that comes with knowing that all things are in His hands. Thanksgiving acknowledges that, and keeps our hearts and minds focused in the right place.

But this too: Paul says that ***the peace of God . . . will guard our hearts and minds.*** But guard them from what? From grumbling. From doubting. From fear. From worry. From discontent. From presumption. These things that satan can use to turn us away from God, as He did to Israel in the wilderness. So instead, Paul says, give thanks. Not because God needs it, but because we do.

So we do at Thanksgiving, and we do in our daily prayers. At least sometimes, I hope. But when we do so here, in the liturgy, it is for the gifts received here: the forgiveness received here, the Word received here, the Body and Blood received here. For our Lord being here. We may not be wandering through a wilderness, but that doesn't mean life is easy. You know that, of course. But thanksgiving acknowledges that we're not alone. That the Giver is with us and providing for us, even as He was for Israel. In the good times, in the tough times, at all times.

We heard tonight also of some men who were wandering in their own kind of lonely wilderness - the lepers. I wonder if they ever grumbled? It's hard to imagine they wouldn't have. And maybe even got angry at God for letting them get such a life-altering disease.

Yet as we heard, Jesus is there for them. And when they call out to Him for mercy, they receive it. Not exactly, probably, as they expected; but mercy given nonetheless. From our consistent, faithful God. Our merciful God.

And returning in thanksgiving, one leper, the Samaritan one, received what he needed. It wasn't that the Jewish lepers were cleansed, but the foreigner, the Samaritan, was not. No. All were in need; all received mercy. All ten were cleansed, healed, *but to only this one* did Jesus say: ***Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.*** He received an extra gift. Cleansing not only on the outside, but also on the inside. The cleansing not only of his body, but the cleansing of his soul.

And you, too. We thank the Lord not only for the external gifts that we can see, but for also the ones we cannot. For not just providing for our bodies, but providing for our souls. For faith and love and mercy and forgiveness. All undeserved. Which is why they're gifts. From a giving God. Who won't stop giving.

So tonight we hear Moses remind us again: *Let us bless the Lord.* And we respond: *Thanks be to God.* Gifts received. Our Jesus has made us well.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.