

23 November 2022
Eve of National Thanksgiving

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“A *Thanksgiving* Carol”

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

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

Ebenezer Scrooge was haunted by the ghosts of Christmas past, future, and present. The Holy Spirit doesn't haunt us like the ghosts did Scrooge, but on a holiday like Thanksgiving, He can help us expand our thinking about this day, to look not just at the present, but also the past and the future as reasons to give thanks.

So first, we heard today from Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. The people of Israel surely had reason to give thanks: they were about to go into the Promised Land and receive their long awaited home. But Moses also directs them to the past - to all that God had done for them and given to them: the manna, the fact that their clothing did not wear out for forty years, and that *their foot did not swell* - that is, that God kept them in good health and strength all those years. And not only those things, but also how God humbled them and disciplined them - those were gifts to be thankful for, too.

But here's the thing: *remember who Moses was talking to here*. The people who would go into the Promised Land were not the people who came up out of Egypt. That crowd, because they did not trust God and would not go into the Promised Land the first time they got here, died in the wilderness for their rebellion. It is *their children* to whom Moses now speaks. A group who know *nothing but* living in the wilderness. So by directing them to think about the past forty years, Moses is really directing them to think about *their whole lives*.

So perhaps this is good for us today as well. At a holiday like Thanksgiving, we usually think about *the past year* and all we are thankful for - but maybe that's not enough. Maybe we need to think back over our whole lives and realize all we have to be thankful for. We have a different perspective now than we did then. We can see things perhaps a bit more clearly. How the wild things we did in our youth could have turned out a lot differently than they did. How God used trying and difficult times for His good. How, though we didn't realize it at the time, God's hand led and directed us to where we are today. So the Holy Spirit, working through the words of Moses, can help us see the **past** and give thanks for the work of God all through our lives.

We also heard today the familiar story of the ten lepers that Jesus healed. Usually the

focus is on the one leper who returned to give thanks to God - not at the Temple, but where God now stood clothed in human flesh. But with this story the Holy Spirit can help us give thanks for the future. For here were ten men who had no future. They barely had a present. They were going to die lonely, horrible deaths. But to those who had no future, Jesus gave a future, and at least to the one who returned, an *eternal* future.

The same is true for us. We are men and women who have a future, but not a good one! The spiritual leprosy of our trespasses and sins had sentenced us to a future of misery and condemnation, apart from God. Until Jesus came along. Until Jesus did not stand at a distance from us, but came to be with us. To be with lepers and sinners. To live with us as one of us. To mercy us. To take our sin and death upon Himself and die a lonely and horrible death on the cross, so that we could live. So that we could have a future. A future in heaven at a feast that doesn't just last a day like Thanksgiving - or a few more with leftovers - but a feast that has no end.

So tonight we give thanks for our future as well as we come and receive the Body and Blood of Jesus. This meal that some Christians call *the eucharist* - the giving thanks. Here we receive the atoning sacrifice of Jesus for our forgiveness, and then offer our sacrifice of praise and thanks for all that He has done. And we know that this feast is just the beginning, just the foretaste of the feast to come, our future, heavenly feast, that has no end. So the Holy Spirit, working through the words of Luke, can help us look to the **future** and give thanks to God for a future that is, for us, just as sure and certain as the past.

Which brings us to the **present** and the words of St. Paul to the Philippians. He reminds us to give thanks in our prayers. He encourages us to think on and practice those good things in life we have to be thankful for - those people and things that are blessings to us, and that we might be to others. And he gives thanks for the Christians in Philippi for being a blessing to him - they were concerned for him, they shared in his troubles, they sent him help time and again, without Paul even asking for it. When Paul was in need, God gave him the Philippians.

And then Paul said this: ***I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*** Yes, Paul had learned to be content in any and all situations in life, but it was God using the Philippians and their love that strengthened and enabled Paul to go on.

So in addition to the blessings of the **past** and the sure and certain promises of the **future** that give us cause for thanksgiving, there are those the Lord has given us **today**. Perhaps we overlook them. Perhaps we take them for granted. But the Holy Spirit, working through the words of St. Paul, can help us consider and see the blessings that are right in front of us each day, but that perhaps we are blind to. And to see the hand of God at work *in* them and *through* them for us.

And this too: this letter to the Philippians Paul wrote from prison. Thanksgiving is not just when everything is going our way, but maybe *especially* when they are not. When we see the devastation of sin, the horror of death, the damage that the devil and his lies are causing, the division in the world that seems to keep getting worse. When it seems that there is little to be thankful for, perhaps it is *especially* at those times that the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Thanksgiving, can open our eyes and hearts to what we have to be thankful for in the **past** and the **future**, which will then help and enable us to be thankful for the **present**, and for the work of God and the gifts of God for us now.

So we sang, *Forgive us Lord, for shallow thankfulness* (LSB #788). But we also pray *come, Holy Spirit!* Work in our hearts, open our eyes, and enable us to give You thanks now, and praise You in Your kingdom forever.

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