

22 November 2023  
Eve of National Thanksgiving

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Thanksgiving in Changing Times”

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

*Come, ye thankful people come; Raise the song of harvest home.  
All be safely gathered in Ere the winter storms begin* (LSB #892 v. 1).

*Sing to the Lord of harvest* (LSB #893 v. 1).

Singing those words sounds a bit quaint, doesn't it? Old fashioned. Anachronistic. Thanksgiving isn't really about the harvest anymore, though it may have started that way. But most of us don't grow our own food anymore, or if we do, it's just a hobby, a little garden in the backyard. Most of our food is grown either by big corporate farms, or shipped in from some far away country. The danger of drought is overcome by irrigation, of pests by insecticide, and of waste by refrigeration or preservatives. Our food supply - here in the United States at least - is so stable we take it for granted. The last time we couldn't get what we wanted in the grocery store wasn't a weather problem or a harvest problem, but a supply chain problem during covid. Harvesting is something we think very little about. And so the God who sends the rain and the sun and causes crops to grow and produce, often gets little thought or thanks as well.

Small farms that are still around know, though, how precarious things are. Too little rain or too much rain, or rain at the wrong time, or scorching sun or oppressive temperatures, or disease or an infestation of pests can wreak havoc and wipe out a year's work. To them, a good harvest is still a big deal. And a cause to give thanks.

Five hundred years ago, Luther was concerned about this very thing - of what our world has become. During his day, society was beginning to change from a mostly agrarian society and economy to a more monied economy. Luther saw this as man becoming disconnected from the *fertile* soil and the small human community, and more connected to trade, *sterile* money, and what has become a global economy. Not that these things are bad in and of themselves, but he saw in them the potential or what we see has happened today - a distancing and increasing gap between God and man. Between the God who provides and man who receives.

Think about the vastly different images of God from a farmer who is dependent on rain and sun, in the right amounts and at the right time - something he can do nothing about but pray - and our virtual, internet, information age, where God is not the provider, Amazon is. God is not omniscient, Google is. God is not omnipotent, the social media

provider who can take down your post is. Food is ordered and just shows up at your door, and earning a living is no longer by working the soil but by becoming an influencer. So, accordingly, Thanksgiving has changed. It has become turkey day, family day. Fortunately, the word *thanks* is still in the name of the holiday, so we haven't lost it altogether! But times have changed, haven't they?

We really shouldn't need a day to remind us to give thanks. We should be thanking God every day, as the Catechism teaches us: that in response to all that God provides for us every day, *it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him*. Though I will confess I do not do this. I do not thank God for all His gifts. I take them for granted. So it's good to have a day we should not need, like this! To not only remind me to give thanks, but to repent of my failure to do so.

But this is a problem that far predates Luther and his concerns. We heard in **Deuteronomy** Moses reminding the people that when they get into the Promised Land not to forget the God who took care of them and provided for them the past 40 years. That when they eat and are full, they *shall bless the Lord your God*. That is, acknowledge Him as the Giver and give thanks to Him. We heard this also in the **Holy Gospel**. I'm quite sure all ten lepers were thankful for their healing, yet only one returned to Jesus to give Him thanks. Only one saw in Jesus *God in the flesh* - God providing for the salvation of His people here in this man, in human flesh and blood.

Flesh and blood that are here for us, too, tonight, in the Supper that is sometimes called the *Eucharist* - which means, the giving thanks. On the night when He was betrayed, Jesus took bread, **and when He had given thanks** . . . Maybe we sometimes gloss over those words. Because, well, *Body and Blood! Forgiveness, life, and salvation!* But as Jesus received and gave thanks, so we, too, receive and give thanks. Thanks to our Father who not only provided bread and wine, but has preserved our lives for another year, has enabled us to be here - not all can, or will, and who here gives us far more than earthly food and drink, but - as the early church liked to call it - the medicine of immortality. Certainly, what we receive here is of primary importance! But it causes a response, too. Of thanksgiving.

And thanksgiving not only in words, but in deeds. Paul praises the Philippian Christians for this, for their care and generosity toward him. That in response to all that God had so generously given them, they did the same toward others. Bringing both them and Paul joy. And in a world where there seems to be very little joy, maybe this is what's missing. That the joy we need we will find when we return to lives of thanksgiving, to the Giver of every good gift. Thanksgiving that leads not only to joy, but also to peace.

Maybe that's a little harder in our world that's becoming more and more virtual, scientific, and global, and less and less earthy and local. But not impossible. We just need to remember where everything comes from - really! - and know that if He didn't give it,

we wouldn't have it. *That* truth seems a bit quaint, old fashioned, and anachronistic! For we're used to getting and taking for ourselves. Of fully-stocked grocery store shelves and Amazon that has multiples of everything and now Artificial Intelligence that can figure out what even Google does not know! But take that away . . . have a drought or plague affect the internet . . . prevent the online harvest of everything that we're used to . . . and see how God enters the picture again. I pray it not come to that, but maybe it would be a blessing. If people turned back, if there was repentance instead of pride, if we once again realized that were it not for Jesus and Him crucified, our sin would long ago have destroyed us and our world. It has not, because Jesus had it destroy Him instead. And then rose that there be life again. Life for us, and all that we need to support this life, both physical and spiritual. All from Him. From His gracious hand, His pierced side, and His powerful Word.

So that we can, as we will sing at the end of the service, *now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices . . . for His countless gifts of love, which still are ours today* (LSB #895 v. 1). And not just today, but everyday. Maybe a new habit. And with it, a little more joy and peace.

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