

Sermon, November 19, 2023

Psalm 107

“Giving Thanks to the Lord”

This morning, as is usual at this time of the year, we think about that intrepid group called The Pilgrims, and of the harvest feast that they shared with the local natives, whom the Pilgrims called the Pokanokets, but were, in fact, members of the Wampanoag tribe who inhabited most of what we call Rhode Island and southern Massachusetts.

Today, we would probably know nothing of that feast if not for a single paragraph in a letter that a Pilgrim named Edward Winslow sent to friends back in England, in it he speaks of sending four men out to kill fowl for the feast, and how Chief Massasoit of the Wampanoags showed up with 80 men with five deer. Throw in vegetables from the harvest, and seafood from the bay, and they had quite a feast that lasted for a few days.

In the letter Winslow makes no use of the word thanks, but he does write of the goodness of God. Our reading this morning also begins by giving thanks to the Lord, because of His goodness and because of His love.

Consider for a moment what the Pilgrims endured their first year in an unfamiliar land. They first landed in Provincetown Harbor on November 11, then headed across the bay, and landed at what would be called Plymouth on December 20. They would proceed to build a single large house for all of them while individual family homes could be built. During that time, sickness, hunger, and frostbite were such that by February, 31 of them would be dead, as well as half the crew of sailors who had manned the Mayflower. Yet, somehow, Winslow was able to write of the “goodness of God”.

Think about that for a moment. Although the feast was much later, those who survived were still able to acknowledge the goodness of God, and still believe in God’s love. This, of course, is one of the most difficult aspects of faith, to still look to the Lord, and believe in divine benevolence at a time when everything seems to be falling apart. We ask ourselves, are we capable of such faith?

But isn’t that what faith is all about? It’s easy to believe in the goodness and love of God when all feels right with our world, but the true test of faith comes in the darkest hours. When we are suffering, when we are scared and anxious, when we are faced with tragedy, can we still accept that as part of the way of the world, and believe that God has not turned his back on us?

A Jewish theologian once said that considering the Holocaust the only God we can accept is the God who suffers with us. Maybe that is what helped the Pilgrims to continue the awareness that not only was God with them in those first terrible months, but that he also knew and shared their suffering and pain.

Look to the cross and see Jesus' outstretched arms. Perhaps in his own time of pain and suffering he is inviting us to come and be embraced in our own times of pain.

And so, we ask ourselves this week if we can offer our thanks to God amid all we experience in this life and how exactly do we do that!

As always, we give thanks to the Lord in prayer and in song, but I think it calls for more. If I may shift gears a bit - last week I preached a sermon on the Parable of the Talents. The very next day I was reading a biography of Antonio Guterres, the current Secretary General of the United Nations, and I came across this - that when he was campaigning for the position of Secretary General, a journalist asked him why he was running for "the most impossible job on earth", and Guterres replied, "because of the Parable of the Talents". He later said, "The fundamental question...is as follows; am I doing the thing that has the best odds to deliver returns proportionate to the talents I was given? We are given talents and so we must repay what we get. In my life, I had this extraordinary thing, which was opportunity opening before me. It might have been different. I was incredibly lucky, but this comes with a responsibility".

This got me thinking that, yes, we do have a responsibility to use our gifts and talents as best we can as repayment for what we have been given, but, also, that more than verbally offering God our thanksgiving, we say thank you through our actions, particularly as those actions arise out of our given talents and help lay the foundations of the kingdom of God. Amen.

Let us pray: O God, we are made glad by the good news of your love for us and for all. We thank you for creating us and giving us all that is necessary for life. We thank you for your action in Christ by which our lives are measured, found wanting, and renewed. Help us to remember your gifts that we may praise you and thank you with lives of joy and service, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.