

*For the Courage to Give Thanks*

Psalm 65; John 18:33-37; Colossians 3:12-17

Whitefish UMC

Thanksgiving Sunday/Christ the King November 22, 2009

- † How many of you remember dressing up in Pilgrim regalia for some kind of Thanksgiving pageant when you were young? Tall black hats, scratchy starched white collars, black shoes with big buckles formed the basic costume, with aprons for the girls and an occasional native headdress thrown in for good measure.
- † Second graders usually got the Thanksgiving nod in our son's elementary school, and our little boy, Pilgrim hat askew, boldly recited his lines as Miles Standish, somewhere back in the early nineteen eighties.
- † I remember thinking then that these well-fed, middle class Helena children lived in a very different world from those characters they so earnestly portrayed—that they owed their freedom, prosperity, and security in many ways to those who celebrated the first Thanksgiving.
- † But then I confess I never thought much more about it until reading excerpts from a book by Nathaniel Philbrick, Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War. When you know more about it, the story of the pilgrim Thanksgiving is even more wonderful and amazing than you'd imagine.
- † The voyage of the Pilgrims to their new land took sixty-five days. There were 102 Pilgrims, 2 dogs, and 25 crew. They lived in a space 5 feet high with thin walls separating families for some privacy. They brought food, water, beer, and firewood—all of which were gone or

- nearly gone before it was over. Two died during the voyage. One woman gave birth to a son.
- † The Pilgrims weren't the first to settle in the new world. They followed settlers to Jamestown, in Virginia. In 1607, 70 of the first 109 settlers in Jamestown died in the first winter. The next year, 440 of 500 new colonists died of starvation and disease. By the time the Pilgrims set sail, 3,000 of the 3,600 English colonists had died.
  - † Imagine finding the courage to make the voyage on the Mayflower considering those dire facts. But the people who filled the Mayflower were different. They fervently believed that God wanted them to establish a place where they would be free to live out their faith—a strict form of Puritanism that aimed to reform the Church of England.
  - † “We verily believe and trust the Lord is with us and will graciously prosper our endeavor.” “It is not with us as with other men whom small things can discourage,” they wrote. Their leader, William Bradford, said, “They knew they were pilgrims.”
  - † On November 9, 1620, the crew of the Mayflower sighted land after a grueling voyage of storms, disasters, what we now call equipment failure, and cold. The Pilgrims explored the coast and wrote and signed the amazing Mayflower Compact.
  - † Given that they were strict Puritans, you might think that they would have established a theocracy, or government based on divine right or religious prerogative. But remarkably, they didn't—instead providing “a government based on civil consent rather than divine decree.” Government in the new colony would derive from the consent of the governed and be carried out by elected officials.

- † After exploring for a month, they settled in Plymouth (now Massachusetts) and started building nineteen small huts. Fifty-two of the 102 Pilgrims would die that winter.
- † Spring came and they cleared and planted, thanks to friendly natives. By September 1621 they had a crop of corn, squash, beans, peas, and barley (which meant they could have beer). The harbor was full of migrating birds, a good source of protein.
- † In early autumn, William Bradford wrote, “They gathered the fruits of their labors—it is time to rejoice together after a more special manner.” He sent four men fowling, and they came back with enough duck and geese to feed everyone for a week.
- † They planned a feast, perhaps remembering the harvest festivals of England. In addition to the vegetables, geese, and ducks, there was striped bass, bluefish, and cod. Their friend, for the moment at least, Massasoit arrived with 100 Pokanoket people, bringing five freshly killed deer.
- † Although it’s unlikely that there was pumpkin pie and cranberry sauce, there probably was wild turkey. There were probably no tables and no forks. They ate with their fingers and knives as usual.
- † Nathaniel Philbrick writes: “The first Thanksgiving marked the conclusion of a remarkable year. Eleven months earlier the Pilgrims had arrived at the tip of Cape Cod, fearful and uninformed. They had spent the next months alienating and angering every Native American they had come across.
- † By all rights, none of the Pilgrims should have emerged from that first winter alive...that it worked out differently was a testament to their grit, resolve, and faith.”

- † And so they “rejoiced together after a more special manner”—for the abundance of the new land and in gratitude for the most basic element of all—that they were alive and not dead.
- † What a long way we have come from that first Thanksgiving. A lot of the progress we’ve made is good—most of us don’t have to worry about our ability to survive the winter without a warm home or enough food. After centuries of mistakes, we hope we have learned how to live more graciously with our Native American brothers and sisters.
- † Thankfully, we aren’t as rigid in our beliefs as our Puritan forebears—there are no stocks for the misbehaving in front of City Hall, although we might wish there were for those of whom we disapprove. In our multi-faith service tonight in Kalispell, we will celebrate Thanksgiving in many faith traditions.
- † Of course, some of the things that have changed since that first Thanksgiving are not for the better. Most of us take the blessings of life—like food, a warm home, a future—for granted. We forget to pray. We’re so busy with the stuff of our days that we don’t pay attention to the things that matter.
- † We forget who is in charge of our lives. How many times have you, have I prayed: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven?” That prayer assumes that we have a king, or at least someone greater than ourselves that holds authority over us.
- † Today is Christ the King Sunday in the church year—the last Sunday in our liturgical (worship) calendar. It’s a bit of a paradox to be proclaiming allegiance to a king on a Sunday when we also celebrate

- Thanksgiving and our history as a nation free of the whims of an earthly king.
- † We live in a much more pluralistic world, nation, than we did the first Thanksgiving. And so Pilate’s question to Jesus in this morning’s Gospel lesson is especially relevant.
  - † We, too, want to know, “what is truth?” and who bears the truth. Our world finds itself in a time of both conflict and blessing. Just as Jesus did. We face the ultimate issues of life and death and love and hope, with many religions claiming to have their own truth.
  - † Even as we respect those who embrace other truths, we who follow Jesus give thanks to God for the ultimate gift of love—for the gift of God’s self, God’s son, Jesus the Christ. Our response is praise and thanksgiving—gratitude and love for God’s mercy and compassion for a sinful and still yet beautiful world.
  - † What is Truth? Pilate asks and so do we. For us, Truth with a capital T is a Life. A person who in himself contains Truth that moves us beyond propositions, words, and facts and toward a King—a very different one than we might expect. Before this Truth we can only stand in silence, just as there was silence when Pilate asked that haunting question. Jesus didn’t need to answer, he simply lived Truth.
  - † We stand in silence and in trembling. He knows the truth about us, our aspirations, our secrets, and our attitudes. And yet he offers us mercy and blessing.
  - † Jesus doesn’t give an answer in words to Pilate—he doesn’t talk about theology; he simply stands there as the embodiment of Truth. An answer does come, but still not with words, but in an act of Ultimate Love and courage. Love and Truth will meet in a Roman execution.

There, God stretches out God’s Truth before the world. Those who come to that Truth will find it. And in that Truth they will find life and love.

- † So, may we find the courage to live our lives as if Christ the King holds reign every day. May we find the courage to show our gratitude with praise and thanksgiving every day. But not just in worship and prayer—in courageous living, in seeking first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness. In showing compassion for others, in offering love and freedom because Christ is our Truth, our King—one not like the kings of this world, but the Servant King who rules our lives and hearts and minds.
- † Amid the sure knowledge that the blessings of our lives come ultimately not from our own brilliance and hard work, may we give thanks to the King who asks that we offer care and mercy and love for all those of our world who suffer, who hunger, who hurt. Just as King Jesus does for us.
- † “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him.”
- † The Pilgrims still have something to teach us about resilience, determination, and faith. The first thing they did upon landing in the New World was to thank God. Of course they never followed perfectly the example of their Savior King, but he was their constant companion, offering courage and hope in a time of desperate circumstances.
- † The details of our lives have changed from those of our Pilgrim ancestors. Yet we find ourselves in need of courage and hope for the living of these days, too. A place may be empty at the Thanksgiving

table this year. Our financial situation may be uncertain. Someone we love may be ill.

- † And though our feast today may be very different from those who celebrated that first Thanksgiving, our hearts and souls have the same hunger: for a power beyond ourselves—a ruler who offers meaning, hope, and healing for us all.
- † Give thanks for Christ our King, from whom all blessings and mercies flow. For us and for a world in need of healing and hope. Amen.

Sources:

Dr. Wiley Stephens, “Thanksgiving in Three Tenses,” <http://day1.org>

John Buchanan, “To Rejoice Together After a More Special Manner,” <http://fourthchurch.org>