

SERMON TITLE: "Let's Give Thanks for Sustenance"
SERMON TEXT: Psalm 107:1-9, 35-38
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 22, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I've been doing some reading about the original Thanksgiving in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621. Historians tell us that a lot of what we have been taught about that event is actually a myth. The Wampanoag Indians didn't arrive to the feast in feathery headdresses, and the Pilgrims' hats didn't have buckles. While the Pilgrims had successfully hunted some fowl, turkey was not the centerpiece of the meal. Instead, the feast featured five deer brought by the Wampanoag, who outnumbered the Pilgrims two-to-one. Unlike our traditional Thanksgiving menu, those original celebrants didn't eat mashed potatoes, because in 1621, potatoes hadn't yet been brought from South America. They didn't eat sweet potatoes or yams, because those hadn't yet been brought from Africa. And they didn't have any wheat flour or ovens to bake pies. What is true about that "first Thanksgiving" is that—after a very grim winter in which half of the Pilgrims died from starvation and sickness—they had a successful vegetable crop, they and the Wampanoag had a harvest feast party that lasted three days, and they gratefully celebrated the sustenance which God had provided for them.

In this month of November, we've been talking about gratitude from some different angles. We began with gratitude as a necessary part of our covenant relationship with God. Then we talked about the importance of having gratitude in our hearts. And, last Sunday, we discussed gratitude as a balance of grit and grace. Today, I invite you to consider the value of gratitude for God's provision of our material and physical needs. Using Psalm 107 as our guide, let's consider why we should give thanks for sustenance.

1—GOD HAS ALREADY BLESSED US

According to Psalm 107, one of the reasons we should give thanks for sustenance is because God has already blessed us with so much. As the Jewish people of long ago sang this ancient song, they

gratefully recalled their history of how God had improved their lives and enabled them to prosper. Psalm 107 reminded the Hebrew people how much God had looked after them and cared for their basic human needs. If we look closely at this psalm, we can see some ways God has blessed us also.

In verse seven, we see that *God provides a home* for us. The Hebrew people recognized what a huge blessing that was, because they had for centuries been a people without a homeland. For a time, they were slaves in Egypt. Then they wandered in the wilderness. God cared for them in those places, but life was hard. So, when God finally led them into the Promised Land and to cities they could inhabit, they experienced an amazing blessing.

Most of us can appreciate this blessing of a home. A home can be a house that keeps us safe, comfortable, and warm. A home can be a biological or chosen family that nurtures and supports us. A home can also be a neighborhood or city that feels familiar and right. Sometimes it's hard to define or explain what makes us feel at home, but when we feel it, we know we are blessed by God.

Like the Hebrew people, we can give thanks for many other material blessings also. In Psalm 107:9, we see that *God provides us with food*—satisfying the thirsty and filling the hungry with good things.

Psalm 107:29-30 says that God stills the storms, calming the distress of those sailing at sea. In more general terms, we could say we are blessed because *God protects us from danger*. With the storm of coronavirus swirling around us, how important is this blessing of God's safety! Of course, we have to remember to do our part to help God keep us safe from harm.

Psalm 107:37-38 also tells us that, when the Hebrew people settled in their new home, they sowed fields and planted vineyards that yielded a fruitful harvest, and God did not let their cattle decrease. For those of us who aren't farmers or ranchers, we could substitute the idea that God has blessed us with jobs at Hill Air Force Base, in schools, on construction sites, in medical care, and in human services. If you're retired, you could equate this to how God has blessed you with a monthly Social Security deposit and

maybe a pension. In other words, *God provides us with a livelihood*, and that is a blessing for which we can be thankful. We give thanks for sustenance because of all these ways that God has already blessed us.

2—IT HELPS US FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE

Psalm 107 gives us a second reason to give thanks for sustenance: To do so helps us focus on the positive. When we think of the good things in our lives and tell God and others how appreciative we are, our life improves. This is true no matter how bad our situation is. If we can think positively, our life will be better.

If we would have read the entire chapter of Psalm 107, we would have heard of lots of troubled times when the Israelites suffered terribly and they cried out to God. That's the background to help us see how their situation relates to our own hardships. But the Psalmist doesn't leave the reader there. As we see in verse six, the helpful point is to focus on the fact that God heard the Israelites' cries for help and delivered them from their distress. God met their needs in wonderful and loving ways.

In my reading this week about the history of the Thanksgiving holiday, I was reminded that the original feast didn't immediately become an annual tradition in our country. For the next 200 years, the Thanksgiving harvest festival "was celebrated sporadically" at best. But, in 1822, a woman named Sarah Hale "began a 40-year" editorial and letter-writing campaign "to get Thanksgiving officially recognized as a national holiday. Three presidents turned her down," until, "in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln [finally] proclaimed the last Thursday in November as an annual celebration of Thanksgiving."¹

One writer tells the story this way:

It's interesting that it should have been [President] Lincoln that responded to Sarah's request. His own life was at a very low ebb at the time. With the Civil War raging, the country was literally [tearing] apart, and Lincoln's political future looked bleak. 'Many of the members of his own cabinet openly despised him and joked about him in public. His wife had been investigated as a possible traitor—a process which Lincoln personally found to be bitterly wounding. In the face of such personal and national circumstances, Lincoln's call for a day of prayer would have made sense. But [a celebration of] Thanksgiving? At a time like that? What must he have been thinking?'²

Maybe President Lincoln knew that he and the whole country needed to put aside negative thoughts in order to gain a victory of the spirit. And maybe that's true for us today. No, we're not in a civil war. But our country is divided, and we are contending with a global pandemic. In this year of awful stress, giving thanks for sustenance certainly helps us focus on the positive.

3—IT REMINDS US WE AREN'T ALONE

A third reason to give thanks for sustenance is to remind us that we are not alone. In the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, the 43 verses of Psalm 107 contain the words *Lord, God, Most High, or he, his, or him* 49 times. What that says to me is that the songwriter had a clear sense of God's presence. In both the times of their successes and their failings, God was with them.

When life is going well, it's easy to get a big head and think that our success is all because we've single-handedly pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps. And when life isn't going very well, it's very easy to feel overwhelmed, scared, depressed, and alone. Giving thanks to God for our sustenance keeps us from becoming conceited and arrogant during the good times. And giving thanks to God for our sustenance keeps us from feeling like a lonely failure during the hard times.

There's a story about a woman who asked her farmer husband to say grace before a meal. Her husband, who wasn't a very religious man, replied, "I don't know why you think we should thank the Lord, when **we** tilled the ground, **we** planted the seeds, **we** did the fertilizing, **we** harvested the crops, **we** ground the grain, **we** kneaded the dough, [and] **we** baked the bread."³

Maybe that farmer ought to realize that **we** did not put the sun in the sky or cause the rain to fall. **We** did not tilt the earth on its axis, so the long days of summer would warm the earth. **We** did not create the first seeds and fertilizer. **We** did not even create our strong backs and smart brains. All those things are the work of God's hands, not ours.

And sometimes the benefits we receive are the work of other people’s hands. There’s *a story about a woman who was watching her ninety-year-old neighbor planting a small peach tree. She inquired of her neighbor as follows: “You don’t expect to eat peaches from that tree, do you?”*

*The man rested on his spade. “No, at my age I know I won’t. But all my life I’ve enjoyed peaches from trees planted by folks older than me. Planting this tree for the next generation is just my way of saying, ‘thanks.’”*⁴

We work, we play, and we live in community with God and neighbor. Together we give and take, so that all our needs are met. Giving thanks for sustenance reminds us that we are not alone.

CONCLUSION

With COVID-19 all around us, Thanksgiving is going to be different this year. We’ll be traveling less, gathering less, and probably cooking in smaller quantities. Because so many people have gotten sick and died, lost jobs, and had to adapt in so many ways, this year’s holiday will include a tragic sense of loss, and a deep sadness about what isn’t possible. While we must face this difficult reality of our times, however, we must also find ways to rise above it. We do that by giving thanks for the sustenance that God has already provided, which then helps us focus on the positive and recognize that we aren’t alone. Thanksgiving 2020 has limitations, for sure. But, if we can hunker down and survive this year’s pandemic—then there will be many more holiday gatherings and celebratory feasts in our future. God will provide and protect. God will see us through. So let’s give thanks for sustenance.

¹As found in “Good News about Thanksgiving,” *Dynamic Preaching* (Oct-Dec. 2009), p. 59. They noted 40plus_humor@onelist.com.

²As found in *Dynamic Preaching*, (Oct-Dec. 2009), p. 59. They noted David Schlafer, *What Makes This Day Different?* (Boston: Cowley Publ., 1998), p. 123.

³Adapted from Frank Lyman, “Finishing in the Top 10%,” *Dynamic Preaching* (Oct-Dec. 1998), p. 13.

⁴Adapted from James S. Hewitt, ed., *Illustrations Unlimited* (Tyndale House Publ: Wheaton, 1988), p. 259.