

SERMON TITLE: "Give Thanks for Blessings"
SERMON TEXT: Ezekiel 34:25-31
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 20, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Every Thanksgiving I like to recall the story of the Pilgrims and their experience at Plymouth Rock. You may remember that the English people who held that famous first Thanksgiving were refugees who were seeking religious freedom in the New World. Not finding liberty in England to worship as they wished, they had first moved to the Netherlands. But the situation wasn't ideal there either, so, in the year 1620, those English Separatists decided to cross the Atlantic Ocean. Unfortunately, they got a late start and didn't arrive in Plymouth Harbor until November 11th. Up against harsh winter weather, the immigrants still had to construct shelters from the cold. The work was greatly hindered by sickness. Over the winter, nearly half of the 102 Pilgrims died.

The 53 Pilgrims who survived the winter made treaties with the Native Americans and learned from them some planting techniques that helped the Pilgrims grow sufficient food in the coming summer. So, at the fall harvest of 1621, the Pilgrim survivors were able to hold a three-day celebration of Thanksgiving that included their Native American friends. Their feast consisted of various types of wild birds, deer, and fish—as well as the fruits and vegetables grown in their gardens and harvested in the forests. Historians tell us that some details we associate with that First Thanksgiving are more folklore than certain history. But what was absolutely for sure was that, after an extremely difficult year, the Pilgrims' life was looking much more hopeful. And, so, those early immigrants to the New World were eager to give thanks to God for their blessings.

Today's scripture reading from Ezekiel 34 takes us back more than 2000 years before the American Pilgrims. Many of the Hebrew people had been forced out of Jerusalem and taken into exile in Babylon. The prophet Ezekiel was one of them. At first, Ezekiel told his Jewish brothers and sisters that

they were getting what they deserved. He said that God was punishing them for their sins. But later, after Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and the Hebrew people had suffered enough, Ezekiel began to give them hope that they would someday return home. At some point in the future, God would again establish them in Israel and shower blessings upon them.

As a way to stimulate gratitude in our minds and hearts today, I invite you this morning to look with me at this hopeful vision in Ezekiel chapter 34. Let's join the prophet in counting out the blessings for which we can give thanks.

1—SAFETY

A first blessing for which we can give thanks is safety. We see this in verse 25, where God promises, "I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely." Except maybe for hunters, hikers, or campers out in the wilderness, today we usually take for granted that we won't be hurt by wild animals. Today we would be more likely to give thanks that we have domesticated dogs and housecats that keep away the mice and other wild creatures that might bring sickness or danger into our homes.

Today's blessings of safety in the midst of nature might also include how God helps us survive natural disasters like windstorms, typhoons, earthquakes, and snowstorms. Decades ago, my husband and I lived in Buffalo, New York, for a few years, and we experienced one of those extreme snow events like Buffalo is having this week. We remember how difficult it was to shovel and shovel and shovel again. We remember our frozen pipes and the giant snow piles that blocked the roads and sidewalks, even months later. It was pretty traumatic. But because we are blessed by God with weather forecasts and advance planning, most people will survive even those kinds of natural disasters. When nature presents us with dangers, God provides us physical safety through relief assistance of governmental agencies, churches, and kind neighbors.

Ezekiel mentions another kind of safety blessing. In verse 28, he indicates that the Israelites could count on God to protect them from human dangers as well: “They shall no more be plunder for the nations . . . and no one shall make them afraid.” Ezekiel also mentions security, peace, and freedom from slavery. While terrorists and criminals do rattle us sometimes, we who live in the United States of America are among the safest people in the world. For our law enforcement officers, our legal and judicial system, our military, and our diplomats who negotiate for peace, we lift up appreciation to God. We give thanks for the blessing of safety.

2—SUFFICIENT FOOD

According to Ezekiel 34, a second reason to give thanks is the blessing of sufficient food. As Ezekiel was encouraging his Jewish people with the hope of returning to Jerusalem and their homeland, he described a cornucopia filled with nutrition. Ezekiel told them that God would send showers in their seasons, and, in turn, “the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase.” In verse 29, Ezekiel tells of God’s promise to provide “splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger.”

Today, we very much associate Thanksgiving with abundant food. Like me, you’ve probably read and heard news stories about how inflation and bird flu are causing our traditional turkey dinner to cost quite a bit more this year than in the past. But despite our increased costs, most of us will still have a table full of food on Thanksgiving Day. And, for most Americans, our holiday feast is symbolic not only of an abundant fall harvest, but also of our plentiful food supply throughout the year. Most of us are fortunate not to suffer from any real hunger. In fact, we’re so fortunate that we sometimes forget about the food shortages experienced by some neighbors across town and around the world.

When we do remember the plight of the poor, we are blessed by God with the opportunity to share our sufficient and abundant food. If we open our eyes and hearts to notice the people around us, we can invite the hungry and lonely to our dinner tables to share meals in our homes. We can also help

to support food pantries like Catholic Community Services, which is providing massive amounts of food to hungry households. A few of us in our congregation have recently had a reason to interact with Catholic Community Services on behalf of a particular family. And we've seen the glorious blessing that is provided there, as clients are allowed to select canned, dry, fresh, refrigerated, and frozen foods from their grocery-store environment. In our First United Methodist Church, we help support Catholic Community Services' food pantry through our annual Craft Fair and our Super Bowl of Caring food drive in January. Maybe some of you make other direct donations. As we share and enjoy our abundant and sufficient food, we give thanks to God for blessings.

3—BELONGING TO GOD

Ezekiel 34 gives a third reason for us to give thanks for blessings. I'm calling this blessing "belonging to God." Throughout this passage, God is claiming the Hebrew people. Yes, they may have been guilty of some pretty terrible sins. Yes, their sins may have been the reason they were taken away into Babylonian captivity. Yes, they probably still have some faults and issues they need to keep working on. But, even so, they are God's people, the sheep of God's pasture. When the exile is over and they eventually return to Israel, they will know that God is with them, in covenant with them, saving them, helping them, and making the Hebrew people themselves a blessing of God to the world.

Yesterday morning, I listened to a webinar. Over four hours, various bishops and other pastoral leaders spoke about their vision for the United Methodist Church in the coming years. In this time of conflict, when many congregations are disaffiliating—especially in the southern regions of our country—there are still far more United Methodist congregations which want to stay and serve. It was inspiring to hear those leaders speak about what it means to them to be United Methodist and what our United Methodist good news is for this time in our history and in the world. Many of them spoke about the importance of welcoming the stranger and making space for people who have previously felt excluded from our congregations. Whether the barriers have been sexual orientation, race, language,

citizenship or resident status, addiction, or poverty—the vision and goal is that the United Methodist Church would be a place where everyone can belong to God.

As we come together in this place of belonging, we are able to encourage one another in faith and spiritual friendship. With emotional confidence and spiritual assurance, we are empowered to invite others to participate with us in the ministry of God’s good news. The blessing of belonging to a congregation, to a denomination, and to God frees us from fear, opens our hearts, and enables us to do God’s good work in our community and the world. We give thanks for this blessing of belonging to God.

CONCLUSION

As I was studying these verses from Ezekiel 34, Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” came to mind. Maybe you know about that psychological construct. Abraham Maslow was a psychologist who said that every human being has certain needs. Maslow diagrammed those needs into a layered pyramid. At the bottom are physical needs like oxygen, water, food, and health. Just above that, Maslow put needs of physical safety. The next level in human requirements are love and belonging. Then comes esteem—our need to be appreciated and valued. At the top of the pyramid is the human need for self-actualization—to be all that we can be.

I thought of Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” because it has so much overlap with what Ezekiel is telling us. We human beings need safety, food, and belonging. And when we have those things, it’s a blessing that brings a sense of worth that enables us to be a blessing to the world. Isn’t it great that God has already given us so much of what we need? In this week of Thanksgiving, I hope you will be inspired to give thanks for blessings.