11-19-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Deuteronomy 8:7-18 Thanksgiving of the Saints Season of Saints Series

Although it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas all around us, this morning we are invited to take a step back, to take a deep breath, to pause and to give thanks.

Throughout this month we have been invited to join the saints, those faithful believers who are still among us as well as those who have gone before us, joining in their songs, their stories and today their thanksgiving.

These are not simply songs of a good life, or stories of good times, or thanks for a good foundation. No, these are the songs, stories and thanks that push beyond ourselves to the One who was and who is and who always will be. These are the songs, stories and thanks for God’s presence and promises and provision in life in the midst of good times and struggle, sorrow and celebration.

When we stop and give thanks, we are not alone.

How many of you will be gathering with family at some point this week, sharing in a traditional or non-traditional Thanksgiving celebration? How many of you have a family ritual around the holiday, whether it be who carves the turkey, who plans for Black Friday shopping, or how you take turns saying what you are thankful for?

How many of you have lost a family Thanksgiving ritual recently? I can still remember the first Thanksgiving I spent apart from my family, and how strange that felt. And only in the past two years has my family had someone who had to work in retail or a restaurant at some point during the day. Some families this week have an empty seat at the table this year due to death or distance. Some families this week have had to change their traditions due to work schedules or travel schedules.

No matter whether your Thanksgiving is traditional or non-traditional, with family, friends or even strangers, consider what you are thankful for this week.

Last week during children’s church with the preschoolers, I invited them to tell someone at home what they were thankful for this week, then to ask the other person what they were thankful for. Maybe that is a ritual you could participate in this week, to share with another what you are thankful for.

You might surprise yourself how little stuff makes your thankful list and how many people make your thankful list. Often when I have asked groups of people, even groups of youth, what they are thankful for, the people in their lives always are named the most often.

So how often do you give thanks for the people in your life? How often do you give thanks for God’s presence in your life?

One summer during seminary I worked for Little Brothers: Friends of the Elderly outside of Chicago, and there I met a woman who welcomed each morning with praise to the Lord for being alive another day. She had seen many family members and friends pass on before her, yet instead of wishing to join them in death, she warmly welcomed the opportunity each day would bring to live and smile and share her love of Jesus.

How different she was to some of the other men and women I encountered that summer who mourned their deteriorating health or growled at the world because they believed the world had been unkind to them.

Although she could have complained, she gave thanks. She allowed her memories to shape her present, and her present to include a grateful heart.

Our memories are precious and powerful tools. They remind us of our connection with one another. They remind us of where we are now compared to where we have been. They remind us of important and even costly lessons learned. Memories of good times can sustain us in our struggles. Memories of struggles can keep us striving for a better life. Our memories are precious and powerful tools, both individually and collectively.

As families we remember shared experiences—stories of weddings and births, stories of family gatherings and family members no longer with us, stories of pranks and struggles and triumphs and everyday life. Ken and I will always remember when he showed up for Thanksgiving with the flu—two days before our wedding.

As a nation we remember the history of our country and those who have gone before us.

We remember the first pilgrims and the native peoples who struggled together and against each other as our country expanded.

We remember pioneers like Lewis and Clark who blazed a trail west and pioneers like John Glenn who blazed a trail in space.

We remember ancestors who immigrated here from all over the world in pursuit of a better life and their struggles, dreams and realities in creating a better environment for their children.

We remember soldiers who have fought for freedom in world wars and conflicts and those who continue to serve even today in the Middle East.

As God’s people we remember what God has done, what God has promised, and who we are called to be together as the community of faith in the world today.

We remember the great things God has done for God’s people- leading them out of Egypt, leading them back from the exodus, healing and welcoming and comforting the outcast, and above all else sending Jesus to live, die and live again among us. We remember God’s promises of presence and peace, of forgiveness and freedom, of goodness and grace.

As the church we remember that we are all God’s children, all who claim the name of Jesus, and together we are called to be the hands and feet, the mouth and ears, the heart and love of Jesus in this world.

As God’s people we remember that faith is relational- we are called to be in a relationship with Jesus, we are called to be in a relationship with other believers in the church, and we are called to be in a relationship with all people, to share with them the love and hope and joy we have experienced in Christ.

Our collective memories are not all stories of good times, with song tracks of celebration. Yet they are the stories that can influence us and encourage us, as we remember where we have been and where we might be going, and who is with us on the journey, including in what ways God has been present with us.

As one pastor put it,

“Memory reminds us of how gracious God is to each of us, even before our awareness of the goodness of God. Memory builds faith when we are faced with trials. Memory also breeds thanksgiving. When we remember where we were and look at where we are, we must thank God either for progress or for the strength to endure the present challenge.” -gbod.org/worship

Such is the case with our Scripture story today from the book of Deuteronomy.

In Deuteronomy, as the children of Israel anticipate finally entering the Promised Land, Moses is reminding them who and whose they are and what their ancestors experienced.

40 years have passed since the Exodus from Egypt. The generations who experienced slavery in Egypt are now gone. The generations standing before Moses have only known life in the desert wilderness, totally dependent upon God.

For 40 years these Israelites have relied on their collective memory of God’s promises and God’s faithfulness. They know that they are God’s beloved and chosen children. They remember God’s call to their ancestor Abraham, a call to follow only the One True God, a call that promised a great nation in a great land. They remember that when their ancestors were slaves in Egypt God heard their cries and delivered them.

They also remember together God’s care for them in the wilderness. God led them by cloud and pillar of fire. God gave them water from a rock, bread from the dew, quails from the sky. Every day their food was provided. In forty years their clothing did not wear out and their feet did not blister. Even when the people complained and rebelled against God, God remained faithful.

Now the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness are about to draw to a close. Eagerly anticipated was the move into the Promised Land, a land vividly described as overflowing with fresh running water, fields of crops and acres of fruit trees, a land of plenty where they will never be hungry again and never thirst, a land of rich minerals where they will prosper and be satisfied.

Soon the people of Israel will be building their own shelters, raising their own food, making their own clothing, fighting their own battles.

And Moses is afraid that when the people of Israel settle down and prosper, they will forget.

They will forget they are the children of God. They will forget what God has done. They will forget to follow God’s ways. They will forget to say thanks.

Moses is warning the Israelites that when they are finally settled in a good land with houses and vineyards and full tables and even rich metals, they are not to forget the Lord who brought them there. Moses is warning the Israelites that when life gets good, they are not to forget the one who provided the means and opportunity to prosper. Moses is warning the Israelites not to forget who they are and who they are still called to be as children of God.

There are times I am forgetful, especially with names. There are times I forget what I was to say walking between my office and Rebecca’s. Yet. more serious than forgetting an anniversary date, more serious than forgetting all you have studied for a math test, more serious than forgetting where you hid that early Christmas present, when we let go of our memories of faith, our memories of God’s goodness, our memories of how to live as Christ’s disciples, then we have forgotten everything in our past and everything our past has taught us.

When we forget the past, forgetting what we have learned and experienced, forgetting both the good days and the struggles, then we also forget the Lord. And when we forget the Lord, we abandon God for our own pride, ego, ambition, independence. We no longer follow his commandments but instead turn to our own sinful and selfish ambitions.

This was true in the time of Moses and it still is true in our lives today.

Moses knew this danger when he told the people, “Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’” Or as Eugene Peterson translates, “If you start thinking to yourselves, “I did all this. And all by myself. I’m rich. It’s all mine!”—well, think again.”

From the Israelites long ago to us sitting here today, we are called to remember the Lord and follow the Lord’s ways regardless of whether we are rich or poor, regardless of whether we have a life of ease or a life of struggle.

Yes, it is easier to trust God when God is all we have to cling to, when life is out of control and there is nowhere left to turn. It is more of a challenge to trust God when life is good, when we are settled and prospering and peaceful. For in those times we are more inclined to say, look what I have done.

Especially here in America we are tempted to puff out our chests and say look what I have overcome, look what I have accomplished, look at the material proof of my success.

If we give in to the temptation to turn away from God we begin to say “look what I have done” instead of “look what the Lord has provided.”

Moses sees this human tendency toward selfish gain and reminds the people of God then and now- don’t forget who and whose you are. Don’t forget where you came from, and what you came through. Don’t forget the Lord; therefore give credit where credit is due. Give thanks to God!

Today Moses may say to us-

Give thanks for your history; give thanks for your ancestors; give thanks for your safety and comfort and freedom and opportunity.

Give thanks for choices and disagreements; give thanks for learning and roadblocks; give thanks for basic necessities of food, clean water, clothing and shelter.

Give thanks for teachers and pastors, friends and family, even strangers and co-workers

who challenge you to grow in faith. Give thanks for the blessings in your life.

And most of all, give thanks to the One who created you and loves you and calls you by name. Give thanks to God for Jesus.

The saints who have gone before us have no need for material blessings. They have no need of daily provisions. Yet they continue to give thanks, and invite us to do so as well today, for one reason only—to celebrate God Almighty. God’s grace and love and hope. God’s presence and provisions and promises.

11 years before the Pilgrims shared a feast in Massachusetts, the first recorded thanksgiving took place in Virginia, and it wasn't a feast. The winter of 1610 at Jamestown had reduced a group of 409 settlers to 60. The survivors prayed for help, without knowing when or how

it might come. When help arrived, in the form of a ship filled with food and supplies from England, a prayer meeting was held to give thanks to God.

--Today in the Word, July, 1990, p. 22. Sermonillustrations.com:thanksgiving

Our closing hymn today was written by a Lutheran pastor named Martin Rinkart near the end of the Thirty Years War, after burying 5,000 people in one year, including his own wife. Yet he still gave thanks for God’s faithfulness in the midst of such incredible loss and struggle.

No matter what we face in this life—from joy to sorrow, from struggle to celebration, God promises to be with us.

When all else is gone, and even when we move from this life to eternal life, we will always still be called to give thanks—for God and God alone.

This is how we join our voices with the voices of the saints—We sing praise to God. We tell stories of God’s amazing grace. We give thanks to God. Here and now and for all eternity.

May we do so as living saints, faithful saints, grateful saints, here and now and for all eternity.

May it be so. Let us pray.