

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: November 23, 2014
Sermon Title: Thank God
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:32-39

Deuteronomy 4:32-39

For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other : has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him. From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire. And because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, giving you their land for a possession, as it is still today. So acknowledge today and take to heart that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.

Unusual Scripture selection, isn't it? We don't often spend time in the Book of Deuteronomy. I think if we were ever in a spelling bee, we'd stumble even trying to spell it. The Book of Deuteronomy is familiar mostly as a book of laws, lots of "dos and don'ts." It is one of the "books of Moses," the first five books of the Old Testament; the Torah, the heart and soul of Judaism. Genesis, Exodus. Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Genesis has all the fun stories: creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." Exodus has the ever-popular Moses, from Charlton Heston to the new Christian Bale movie; the burning bush, Pharaoh, the parting of the Red Sea, manna from heaven, the Promised

Land. Then the Bible gives us Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy: what to eat, how to worship, when to work, whom to hate/love, where to live; start doing this, stop doing that, don't even think of doing this. How to treat enemies, slaves, debt. It even tells you that if your kid is a pain in the neck, kill him. But be good to the land. Yet, within all the sternly stated finger-wagging threats, the Scripture for today is pretty good advice for Thanksgiving: remember.

I love the way it begins: *For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other.*" (Deut. 4:32)

And then God gets specific: *"has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of a God speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?"* (Deut. 4:33-35)

Doesn't that sound like a great old-fashioned grandparent? Or some beloved coach or boss?

"Hey, don't forget what I did for you! Remember, huh? Remember that time I helped you out, lent you some money, gave advice, covered for you, gave you a chance? I was always there for you, remember?" It is good to remember. That's really the foundation of Thanksgiving, isn't it?

At the end of our worship, we'll sing an old-fashioned Gospel hymn, "Count Your Blessings." The chorus gets to the heart of it all:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.*

Then the verses remind us that whenever things get tough, or we get envious of others, or conflicts or problems seem to overwhelm us, stop for a minute and "count your many blessings, name them one by one."

*When upon life's billows you are tempest-tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,*

*Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
So, amid the conflict whether great or small,
Do not be discouraged, God is over all;
Count your many blessings, count them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done!"*

Good stuff. Good advice. And a good song, we'll have fun singing it, above all because it's true. That's what the writer of Deuteronomy was trying to do: to stop, remember, be grateful. He was reminding the people of Israel all that God did to keep them going, to give them hope, to encourage and protect and motivate

In those days God was believed to be at work in all sorts of spectacular ways, and he cites in particular God's speaking to Moses coming out of a burning bush. In the middle of the wilderness a bush appeared to be on fire but not consumed. It wasn't turning to ash and ember. It just kept burning, enough to get Moses's attention. When Moses went over to check it out, God spoke to him, told him to go back to Egypt, talk to Pharaoh. "Tell old Pharaoh, 'Let my people go.'"

That's one of the key stories in the history of the Jewish people, in the history of Judaism, in the history of Israel. That's Israel's version of Washington at Valley Forge, kneeling in the snow in prayer, talking to God. "Remember that," Deuteronomy says to the Jews, "remember what God did."

Around Christmas the new Hollywood "Moses" movie is coming out. Most of us grew up with the classic Cecil B. DeMille extravaganza, and it was chock-full of special effects for the day. Can you imagine with modern technology what those special effects will look like now? I've seen the previews. It's great fun. The parting of the Red Sea, the plague of frogs and boils and locusts, the burning bush. God will be pretty amazing! Nowadays we'll credit the special effects. In the old days, people credited God. Of course, God still does "special effects," with or without the credit.

We had some Canadian visitors in church last Sunday, and I was chatting with them before worship. I told them about a speaking engagement I once had in Winnipeg, where I saw the aurora borealis, the northern lights, the cosmic light show put on in the heavens for anyone who chooses to look up.

I remember traveling the back roads of Western Massachusetts with Alida in a big rainstorm, and when it cleared, we saw a double rainbow. And this October I took a writing retreat to Vermont. It was absolute peak foliage,

and everywhere I looked at every hour of the day on every road I took, there was this stunning, exhilarating explosion of color. I finally gave up, closed my book, and put down my pen. I walked out in a field, surrounded by mountains. I just stopped. looked, stared. It was my "burning bush" experience, 2014. And it was just as miraculous, just as real, just as full of God. Those were God's "special effects," saying to me, just as loud and clear as God said to Moses, "I'm here for you." Deuteronomy dares us to remember.

Thanksgiving has two special memories for me. I went away to prep school when I was 13. This was before cell phones, Skype, e-mail. I was just a kid from Queens, dropped off in the middle of nowhere with \$5 spending money and a cheery farewell from my parents, "See you at Thanksgiving!" Sure enough, the day before Thanksgiving, a train pulled up just outside of campus, and several hours later, I was in Grand Central Station. Carrying my suitcase (suitcases didn't have wheels in those days), I took the subway out to Queens. By then it was 7 PM. I got off the subway and walked straight to the synagogue.

Long before it was popular, my father and the local rabbi linked their congregations for a Thanksgiving eve service. That really started Thanksgiving for me. God, my church family, our Jewish neighbors in the synagogue, together. My suitcase and I. I didn't stop off for a slice at the pizza place that was right there at the subway stop. I didn't go home first to drop off my suitcase. I didn't run off to find old girlfriends. Thirteen years old, I walked straight to the synagogue.

You've heard me preach long enough so you know I wasn't a good kid, I'm not trying to make myself out to be holy. I'm just telling you how it was. In my young teenage mind, God, religion, Thanksgiving, and family were all tied up together. We lived the Deuteronomy Scripture. I didn't know it at the time, but we were doing it. We were talking time to "count our blessings." We were taking time to remember.

Decades later, 25 years ago now, my mother died on Thanksgiving. Again, you've heard me preach enough so you know that no other event in my adult life has so affected my whole life. And, of course, I faced what so many of you face when you lose a loved one near a holiday. People always say, "Oh, how sad. Now, every time that holiday comes around, it'll be ruined." My response to that has been twofold First, if my mother had died in February, I'd still be missing her each Thanksgiving, and the same with you and your losses. That empty chair is always empty, holiday or no holiday.

BUT—and this is big—I did decide to turn each Thanksgiving into giving thanks for my mother. Not concentrating on her death, but on her life.

A couple of years ago, Alida and the kids did me a great favor. We actually used the Thanksgiving dinner as a memorial service, a “remembrance dinner,” a true “thanksgiving” for my mother. We sat around and told stories about her favorite recipes, family vacations, her love of Elvis Presley, the times she protected us when we got in trouble, her “Swedish-ness,” her Swedish meatballs, her Swedish brownies, her playing hymns on the piano late at night, long after we had gone to bed. We all had favorite memories, favorite stories of when she was so real in our daily lives.

I remember telling the story (it happened at least once a week) of my mother’s sending me to Bob’s Delicatessen with this order: “Go down to Bob’s, and order six slices of bologna. Tell Bob to slice them thin, so thin I can read the newspaper through them.” Years later, Neil Simon made that famous. I don’t know if he overheard my mother or if every Depression-era mother said the same thing. But all these memories keep love alive. Deuteronomy is simply saying, “Use your memories to keep faith alive. Remember when God was there for you.”

Let me close with a mini-sermon within this longer sermon. A couple of weeks ago, Rachel and I led a Thanksgiving service at The Watermark, the senior living center on Park Avenue. Rachel told about a spiritual exercise she does every day in her journal. She told us every day we should remember a rose, a thorn, and a bud. *A rose, a thorn, and a bud*. Three things to be grateful for. Three daily “thanksgivings.”

The rose represents some highlight of the day, some special hero, some person who was there at just the right time, something that was good that day. Give thanks for your rose.

The thorn is exactly what you’d expect it to be. Every day has a thorny part, something that doesn’t go right, a negative experience, a negative feeling, a failure of some sort, a disappointment, a dark cloud. Dare to give thanks even for the thorn. Who knows what you might learn from the thorn?

And the bud? That’s something you’re looking forward to, some goal, some purpose down the road. It could be an event, a healing, a family gathering, a promotion, a celebration, an understanding, a reconciliation, a new beginning. Something around the bend, with a hint of hope. Give thanks for the bud.

All three, the rose, the thorn, the bud. All three require you to remember: to remember what's good in your life, to remember what needs work, to remember what's worth waiting for.

That's Rachel's updated version of our old Gospel hymn, and both are updated versions of Deuteronomy. Remember, give thanks, and see God at work in the middle of it all.

And now, let's sing our Thanksgiving faith

"Count Your Blessings"

*When upon life's billows you are tempest-tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*

Refrain:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.*

*Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings, every doubt will fly,
And you will keep singing as the days go by.*

*When you look at others with their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold;
Count your many blessings—money cannot buy
Your reward in heaven, nor your home on high.*

*So, amid the conflict whether great or small,
Do not be discouraged, God is over all;
Count your many blessings, angels will attend,
Help and comfort give you to your journey's end.*