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Date: November 18, 2018
Sermon Title: A Thanksgiving Message
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:6-8

Deuteronomy 8:6-8

Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey.

The Scripture you just heard I first heard maybe 10 years ago. As I mentioned earlier, our Church is hosting the Fairfield Clergy Interfaith Thanksgiving service tonight. It hasn't been done in 10 years. The last one was right here, and the preacher that night was a rabbi who used today's Scripture. The interfaith Thanksgiving service was an annual event for many years, but then it died for no particular reason; it just did.

But Alida has made it her goal to revive the Fairfield clergy group, and she's done that. They had one of their largest gatherings two weeks ago, and it included clergy who never used to come. And Alida made it her goal to also revive the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, and that's happening tonight.

These things are important for more reasons than we might think. The big clergy meeting was big in large part because Alida invited the Fairfield Fire Chief to talk about "disaster preparedness," something very much on everybody's mind, sad to say. With the horrific fires in California, the mass murders of Jewish worshipers in Pittsburgh, the devastating hurricanes this fall, and last, the mass murders at schools and clubs killing young people, the sad truth is that one day we may need to come together as a community, as neighbors, in ways we haven't had to do since the burning of Fairfield by the British in 1779.

The Fire Chief made it clear: if that day comes, he will need us as places of worship, and as clergy who know one another, respect one another, and can work together for the common good. Not in competition. Not as strangers. But as neighbors, friends.

So, something good is stirring around here, and Thanksgiving is one of those easy-to-do, positive, hopeful occasions when we can all join together. A religious person of any type, *any type*, is rooted in thanks-giving.

If you study world religions in any culture, there was that first moment of realization when humans realized that there was a force at work outside themselves and greater than themselves; and that it would be good to be on good terms with that force. The best way to do that is to express appreciation, gratitude, thanks . . . giving to that force.

That force may be nature or the sun, or it may be what we call "God." But since the dawn of time, people showed thanks. They might leave an offering of food before an especially significant tree, or beside a river, or near a mountain thought to be holy. They might lift their arms up in praise or fold their hands in prayer or lay themselves down upon the ground in respect.

As time went on, people organized themselves into religions and built specific places for worship, and once again people gathered together to give thanks. It's a human impulse. It's in our DNA, but sometimes we forget that "forgetting gene" that's also in our DNA.

I have a dating history in my youth that, for the most part, you don't want to hear about. Let's just say that 11 years of all-male schools meant countless "mixers" and trips to women's schools and colleges and fraternity parties. I dated a lot and broke up a lot. And most of the breakups were benign. A girl might say, "We have nothing in common" or "You're an idiot" or "I hate you." I could handle that. But the breakup line that really hurt was when she'd say, "You took me for granted." *You took me for granted*. That phrase covered a multitude of sins: I didn't call, I didn't write, I didn't send flowers, I forgot her birthday. You name it, I forgot it. Pretty lame. God anticipates my lameness. Or call it "our" lameness if you want to be included in this sermon.

In my Bible, the title of today's Scripture, right there at the top of Deuteronomy Chapter 8, the title says, "Do Not Forget." And seeded through the chapter are these warnings: "Be careful . . . Remember . . . Be humble . . . Be careful that you do not forget . . . Remember the Lord Your God . . ." Plus one last one almost could be God's "break-up line" for taking God for granted! Verse 19 says, "If you ever forget the Lord your God . . . you will be destroyed."

Now, of course, nobody likes being constantly reminded to remember, even if we deserve it. And yet, come on, admit it, we need reminders. And it has nothing to do with “senior moments”—it has everything to do with human nature. We do forget. We live in constant overload: sensory overload, commitment overload, time overload, information overload.

You’ve got children to raise. And even if you’re 75, you’re still raising them! Grandchildren to nurture. Volunteer organizations that count on you. Friends who need you. Doctors’ appointments. I haven’t even mentioned work, travel, commuting.

And then your doggone Church is looking for your 2019 pledge, plus inviting you to something or other every week. So what’s wrong with helpful reminders? I’ve thought of placing a gigantic banner across the entire front of the Church, 20 feet wide, 10 feet high, that says “Hey! Don’t forget us. We’re open! Just a friendly reminder! And maybe a P.S. at the bottom: “If you *do* forget, you’ll be destroyed!”

That’s sort of what God is doing in Deuteronomy, stating the obvious *and* the forgotten. Let’s put it in context: Israel as a nation, Judaism as a religion didn’t come into being overnight. It was a long, arduous journey. For generations Abraham and his descendants were just a wandering tribe, looking to settle down somewhere. For 400 years, they were slaves in Egypt. For 40 years they wandered the wilderness, hoping for the Promised Land. Every step of the way, they met opposition, conflict, internal and external, they struggled with the whole concept of being a singular people with a singular God and a universal purpose. They were tempted and twisted every which way.

Now, if you want to make it more interesting, you can layer America’s history on top of Israel’s, take us from the Pilgrims to today and place us right on top of Israel from Abraham to King David, two nations called out of turmoil on their way to doing something special. Good leaders, bad leaders; wrong choices, right choices; lots of advantages and blessings, lots of obstacles and challenges; wars inside and outside, heroes and villains. And all along the way, a national hope, a national dream, a national purpose, calling us forward.

To get there, we and Israel, to get there, God interrupts the journey and says, “Don’t forget. Don’t forget where you came from. Don’t forget who stood with you along the way. Don’t forget what’s important. Don’t forget why you exist.” That’s Deuteronomy. And God reminds them (and us) repeatedly—not just in Chapter 8, but repeatedly—God reminds them of the bitterness of slavery, the long, long nights of uncertainty, the deprivations and discouragements along the way; God reminds them of the destructive power of their doubts, fears, and betrayal.

And then God paints a picture of what they found, of what God led them to, and the picture . . . Well, hear it again, "God brought you into a good land, a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive trees and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce, and you will lack nothing."
(Deuteronomy 8:7-9)

I'm sure you're already ahead of me, aren't you? You're listening to all those verses about the wonders of the Promised Land, and you've already begun to hum "America the Beautiful" in your head. You can't help it. Go ahead, sing along with me that first verse:

*O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea."*

That's just Deuteronomy Chapter 8 updated for us. We love that hymn because it evokes what we remember America to be. What we love America to be. What we want America to be. It evokes splendor, wonder, magnificence, expansiveness, opportunity, and hope at its most basic.

In my books and sermons I've told you of my love for George Innes, my favorite painter. To call him a landscape painter does not do him justice. He came along around the time of the "Hudson River School" of painting. You've seen their examples in all the great museums.

Tall, majestic mountains, magnificent silver waterfalls, imposing forests and evergreens, skies without limit, valleys rich with promise. All of that beckoned to every American on this soil: to the Native Americans who treasured it from the first, to African-Americans who found freedom by sweat, courage, and blood, ready to embrace that majesty for themselves. To every immigrant and child of immigrants who fled lives too restricted, too oppressive, too hopeless and pointed toward this Promised Land, George Innes's unique contribution to such landscapes was his faith. Plain and simple, it is as if he painted a lovely landscape painting, usually a big one, grand in scale, grand in vision, everything a good landscape artist would do, and then it's as though he picked it up with both hands, carried it over to a gigantic box, and dipped the entire

painting into God. The whole painting. Every inch of the canvas, every tree and brook and moon, every farmhouse, fence, and meadow, all infused with God.

This isn't just my interpretation; he said so himself. And yet, there's nothing obviously religious anywhere: no Church, no Jesus, no Bible story, just nature-life so fused with God that both are indistinguishable. And when you stand before it, you hear George Innes saying, "Don't forget the God who gave you this. Don't forget where you came from, how you got here. Remember."

Remembrance is at the heart of Thanksgiving. I hope at every Thanksgiving table represented here in Church today that someone will be designated to call everyone together, to invite you all to hold hands, and then "count your blessings." You know that old hymn, don't you? Some of you do:

*Count your blessings
Name them one by one
Count your many blessings
See what God has done.*

Remember who we are, where we came from, what got you here, and who stood by us each step of the way. Let's conclude our worship today with a glorious Thanksgiving hymn, No. 717, "Let All Things Now Living":

*Let all things now living a song of thanksgiving
To God the creator triumphantly raise.
Who fashioned and made us, protected and stayed us,
Who still guides us on to the end of our days.
His banners are o'er us, His light goes before us,
A pillar of fire shining forth in the night.
Till shadows have vanished and darkness is banished
As forward we travel from light into light.*

*His law he enforces, the stars in their courses
And sun in its orbit obediently shine;
The hills and the mountains, the rivers and fountains,
The deeps of the ocean proclaim him divine.
We too should be voicing our love and rejoicing;
With glad adoration a song let us raise
Till all things now living unite in thanksgiving:
"To God in the highest, Hosanna and praise!" Amen.*