

## **THANKS AT ALL TIMES**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

November 23, 2008

Scripture: Psalm 136; Matthew 26:20-30

The story of the Pilgrims who came to Plymouth in 1620 is a story of hardship, the desire for religious freedom, and remarkable perseverance in the face of adversity. In the early part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, these English Separatists went to Leiden in Holland to escape the religious intolerance they were experiencing in England.

But by 1620 the Separatists were unhappy that their children were starting to speak better Dutch than English, and young men were conscripted into the Dutch military, forced into a life of what was described at the time as “dissoluteness and danger to their souls.” Moreover the Dutch did not keep the Sabbath in the manner of the English, and the Separatists were shocked at the lax attitude of the Dutch toward the Lord’s Day.

They resolved to come to a New Land to take the gospel to the farther reaches of the world and to live their lives in a more hospitable country.

They set sail aboard the Mayflower with 102 passengers of whom 32 were children, and 30 additional crew members. One soul died on the voyage and two infants were born. It was a long trip, but by late November they set foot on the soil of the new land at Plymouth. In a few months, by mid-January, a common house had been built and the village began to take shape. The native Americans made friends with them; Samoset and Squanto, leaders among the Massasoit and Wampanoag. But during that first winter a great sickness befell the settlers and half their number died. Half the crew of the Mayflower were lost as well. When what was left of the crew set sail in the spring to return to England, the Pilgrims must have wondered whether they had done the right thing as the sails disappeared beyond the horizon.

They planted seeds and learned about the land from their Indian neighbors. They caught herring and used it as fertilizer for planting corn, pumpkin, and beans. They hunted for deer, bear, and turkey and the children learned to find berries and nuts.

In October of 1621 they sat down together, Indians and Pilgrims, and shared a meal together: venison, duck, turkey, corn and pumpkin.

They did so because they found reasons for thankfulness. They had gained their foot-hold on the edge of an inhospitable continent. They were recovering in health and strength. They were making the best of a hard life in the wilderness. They had proved in a modest way that they could sustain themselves in the new, free land. They saw glimmers of hope that they would be able to establish the freedom they sought.

We tend to forget that the first Thanksgiving was an occasion of mixed blessing. Half of their number had died, and every person at that first Thanksgiving feast had a raw and fresh sense of the fragility of life and the pain of grief in their heart.

It was not England, and it was not Holland, but it was America, and whatever of mixed feelings they had about it, seated there as intruders among their Indian friends, it still seemed to them better than where they had been, and more promising than what they

had endured. They did not know what the future would bring, but they were hopeful nonetheless.

Through it all they trusted that their lives were lived in God's care, and God would not let them down. They believed Paul's words to the Romans, "if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord, so then whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."<sup>1</sup>

It strikes me that this is precisely the word we need to hear this Thanksgiving which feels very much like a mixed blessing, a harsh time in our national life, a season of enduring.

You read the paper these days and you wish you hadn't. Citicorp is laying off employees, the auto industry is on the ropes, the government is throwing good money after bad and seems unable to figure out how to run the free lunch counter it has created for the banks and financial houses, folks trying to get healthcare are being priced out by insurance companies demanding higher co-pays and fewer approved procedures for the very people who are least able to pay the costs out of pocket.

You know the story as well as I do. Forty percent of the value of equities in the stock market have been lost since the beginning of the year, and there seems to be no end in sight. The Pilgrims may have had it hard in 1621, but economically speaking, we have our own losses to contend with.

How do you give thanks in times like these, in *all* seasons, both when things are good, and when things are not so good?

The psalm today reminds us of the song Israel sang when it remembered its history. It rises out of the worship and liturgical life of the temple. The repetitive refrain, "God's steadfast love endures forever," represents the sung response of the congregation who answered the liturgist's recitation of a story of endurance and how God was present at every step of the way. So Clinton McCann, an Old Testament scholar, notes that "from creation to exodus, to wilderness journey, to possession of the land, to the present moment, including the daily meal – all are pervaded by and dependent upon God's steadfast love."<sup>2</sup>

How is it that the psalmist can be so thankful in every season, giving thanks even when things are difficult, remembering hard times, times of slavery and wandering in the wilderness, times when enemies surrounded Israel, and food was scarce, times when there seemed to be little for which to give thanks? Yet in every season comes the affirmation, "God's steadfast love endures forever."

The answer I think is that the psalmist sees the long view, remembers the good times in the midst of the bad, and remembers in the good that there was also a time when things were bad so that no season in life is lived isolated from what has preceded it or what will come after it. God considers our condition and has mercy on us, providing for our needs and helping us walk even through difficult times as a strength and support. That's the faith of the psalmist, who does not idolize the good in life, but understands that in good times and in bad, God's mercy is present.

In that lovely book *Gilead*, John Ames speaks in a letter to his young son of his life in a small Iowa town. At one point, Ames writes,

I was thinking about the things that had happened here just in my lifetime – the droughts and the influenza and the Depression and three terrible wars. It seems to me now we never looked up from the trouble we had just getting by to put the obvious question, that is, to ask what it was the Lord was trying to make us understand. The word “preacher” comes from an old French word, *prédicateur*, which means prophet. And what is the purpose of a prophet except to find meaning in trouble?<sup>3</sup>

Ames understands that no season lasts forever, and that when we take a longer view and see that God has been with us in every season, all this long while, we are more likely to see what it is that God is trying to make us understand... that God’s steadfast love endures forever.

To borrow Ames’ thought, there is no place in the Bible where a prophet’s word brings more meaning to trouble than in the words of Jesus at the Passover meal where he gathered his disciples one last time and broke bread and passed wine and said that it was like his body they were breaking when they broke the bread. He said it was like his blood pouring out when they passed the cup.

And yet even at that table, Matthew says Jesus *blessed* the bread before he broke it, and he *gave thanks* for the cup before he passed it. He blessed and gave thanks at the table of thanksgiving on the night when he was *betrayed*, the night when he was *arrested*, the night when *everything was falling apart* in his life.

I think about our Thanksgiving tables this coming week. Some of you will be eating with family, and some will be having in friends, some of you have reservations at a favorite restaurant, and some will go to the Caring Community meal at Our Lady of Pompeii, some of you will eat alone, and others will be far from home. Some will be working Thanksgiving Day. And others will be out of work altogether.

It’s a hard time across America this Thanksgiving and it’s a time when we are reflective about where we are and what blessings we have.

The irony is that almost every memorable Thanksgiving has been one when our hearts were tender, when our sense of loss has made our appreciation of gain more acute. We gather at the Thanksgiving table and remember the year past. At nearly everyone’s table someone is missing. Someone whom time, or difference, or illness, or death has summoned away. Our celebrations are always touched with melancholy, too, as were those who first celebrated God’s steadfast love on these shores.

This year we have a Thanksgiving in which it is hard to be hopeful even as we are able to be thankful.

Peter Gomes, Minister of the Memorial Church at Harvard University writes in his latest book about a visit on campus by Alan Paton, the South African novelist. His book *Cry, the Beloved Country* is a classic in modern literature and a documentary of apartheid-ridden South Africa.

Paton gave three lectures at Harvard. Gomes describes them as “more autobiographical reflections and scriptural commentary than sustained analysis,” but “...he drew large, divided crowds. A lot of older people came to hear him out of admiration, and a lot of black South African exiles came out of anger that still their

country should be represented in the West by an old white novelist.”<sup>4</sup> At the end of the third lecture there was a question and answer session, and an older Cambridge lady asked Paton, “Given all that you have said and we have heard, are you optimistic about the future for your beloved country? Paton paused, scowled, and said, ‘Madam, I am not optimistic, but I remain hopeful.’”<sup>5</sup>

Paton did not expand on his distinction, but I suspect that in this season of travail, many of us here might say something of the same thing about this Thanksgiving. There is not much in sight to make us optimistic, but there is much that should keep us hopeful.

Optimism is the blind and ill informed expectation that every day in every way things are getting better and better. The problem is that when things don’t get better, the optimist’s mantra is proven bankrupt.

Hope, on the other hand, has nothing to do with optimism it is born of faith. And faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

It was William Sloane Coffin who said that “Hope’s opposite is not pessimism, but despair. And if Jesus never allowed his soul to be cornered in despair, clearly we as Christian’s should not either.”<sup>6</sup>

Hope helps us keep believing in the long view, that God’s steadfast love endures forever.

I have seen hope emerge right before my eyes sometimes, even when I least expected it, when despair seemed the most reasonable disposition.

It happened this week. I was visiting with one of our members, an older woman who had been in the hospital for a few days with an undiagnosed and worsening pain in her stomach. It appeared that she had a blockage and needed surgery, but she was so weak it seemed a risky proposition.

It was Sarah who suggested that perhaps this older woman might appreciate hearing some of the psalms if I visited her, because she knows them so well, because she is the widow of a minister. So I took my prayer book with me, and found my way up to NYU Hospital.

I greeted her in her room and she seemed happy to see me, weak and faint in voice. After chatting awhile I offered to read her some familiar psalms, the 46<sup>th</sup>, the 121<sup>st</sup>, the 23<sup>rd</sup>. She closed her eyes and allowed the words to seep into the familiar places of her soul.

After I finished reading she told me that the doctor had visited her a little earlier and explained what her diagnosis was. “Lymphoma,” he said, “rather advanced.” But she was feeling relieved because it meant that there would not need to be any surgery in her weakened condition and she was thankful for the good care that she was getting. Clean sheets, nurses to attend her, food prepared and served, and the visits of her son and pastors. She hoped, she said, to go home soon and spend her last days there.

She smiled and went on, “I wish you’d been here earlier, the doctor came to see me with three handsome young interns in tow. They told me their names and each one checked me over, and then the doctor said to me, “Maybe you would like to share with

these young men something that they should know as doctors, especially in light of your faith, and what I've just told you."

She said, I hardly knew what to say. It seemed like it was so important. Here I was in this bed and I was supposed to say something that these young doctors could remember. I didn't think I had anything to say, so I just said, "Somehow I trust that whatever happens to me I will be in God's hands, and that gives me hope. Whatever happens, I will be all right." And then she looked at me and said, "I wish you'd been here. You would have said it so much better than I could."

And I looked at her and I said, "No, I couldn't. I couldn't have said it any better at all."

It's a tough Thanksgiving this year. Maybe a lot like that first Thanksgiving with the company of Pilgrims depleted by half, an unexpected collection of natives and immigrants, strangers become friends, sitting at table together, breaking bread, and pouring wine, sharing food, and living in the hope that the God who had brought them thus far would not abandon them in whatever was yet to come. In that spirit they gave thanks, and so do we.

Trusting in God's steadfast love, believing that whatever happens we will be all right, we give thanks this year.

A blessed and hopeful Thanksgiving to you all.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 4:8

<sup>2</sup> Psalms, **The New Interpreter's Bible**, Vol. IV, J. Clinton McCann, Jr., (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 1224.

<sup>3</sup> **Gilead**, Marilynne Robinson, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) 233.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Gomes, **The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus**. (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) 210.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 210

<sup>6</sup> William Sloane Coffin, **Credo**. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 19