

Describing the Indescribable Gift

Deuteronomy 8:1-18

II Corinthians 9:6-15

“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

When we gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing on this Thursday next, our celebration will be rooted in two stories that have shaped our character personally and nationally. The first is the story of our nation’s founding. William Bradford, passenger on the Mayflower and first governor of the Plymouth Colony, writes,

“Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their foot on the firm and stable earth....they had no friends to welcome them, no inns to entertain or refresh their weather-beaten bodies, no houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succour....What could not sustain them but the Spirit of God and his grace? May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say, ‘Our fathers...which came over this great ocean, were ready to perish in the wilderness, but they cried unto the Lord and he heard their voice and looked on their adversity. Let them therefore praise the Lord, because he is good and his mercies endure forever.’”

The second story, on which the first is based, is the story told at the end of the exodus. Speaking on the boundary between the wilderness and the land in Deuteronomy, Moses says,

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna....The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years....For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees, of pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing....You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.”

In both stories, it is God who “*brought us out* of Egypt/brought us over the vast and furious ocean and *brought us into* the land.” But in between “the verb of exit and the verb of entrance,” Walter Brueggemann says, the real story awaits those who lean in close enough to hear. Nowhere but in the wilderness may we face the truth of our collective human existence: “our vulnerability...our lives exposed to threats of death and at risk without sure resources.... Here,” Brueggemann says, “the memory is not so public and not so fully on display; ...no reference to pharaoh, and nothing as dramatic as Sinai occurs.”

Consciously or unconsciously, the stories we will tell at our not so public tables on Thursday will be prompted by these founding stories of “risk and desperation...of peculiar sustenance and care...,” stories of the God who tests and leads and humbles and feeds. We mostly tell them at a distance from the wilderness or the perilous voyage, like the seventh century B.C. writer of Deuteronomy who borrowed Moses’ ancient voice to remind a privileged generation in Judah of the wilderness, when desperation humbled and hunger threatened to do their ancestors in.

Presently we sit around tables groaning under the weight of turkeys stuffed, sweet potatoes laced with bourbon, cranberry sauce still running, Brussels sprouts in bed with chestnuts, green beans swimming in mushroom soup, Beaujolais and Sauvignon Blanc flowing, pumpkin pies cooling. Then someone begins to tell the story. “Remember the first few years of marriage, honey, in that little apartment when we didn’t have two cents to rub together but had each other for warmth?” Another continues: “Will you ever forget that Thanksgiving, as mother lay dying in the bedroom, when we ate on our laps and laughed until we cried?” And then, “When I was your age [and we think “Oh please, not this story again!”], it was the height of the depression, when your great-grandfather sold papers on the street for pennies while your great-grandmother canned until the cupboard was full for the winter and your grandfather walked two miles [or was it ten?] in the snow without boots to school. That was the year when, instead of turkey, we ate hash on Thanksgiving and it was the most extravagant feast ever!” Or maybe, just maybe this Thanksgiving for the first time, Uncle Bill might break his silence and tell the story of Thanksgiving in Viet Nam, when the fighting stopped long enough for him and his buddies to count their blessings and eat their rations.

You and I tell wilderness stories, of the days when God humbled and tested you to know what was in your heart; remember seasons when God let you hunger in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone; marvel at the years when the clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell. You speak of these times with the younger generation, who may chime in with their own story of testing in Calgary. You tell the story of your life between the verb of exit and the verb of entrance, a story we fail to tell our children at their peril and, I might add, a story we forget at our own! At the heart of each of these stories is the experience of “extreme vulnerability and total dependence,” when you found yourself in a place where none of your own resources were adequate, where you were not self-sufficient, where you could not manage on your own. Yet it was precisely in these places of “dreadful inadequacy” that our ancestors acknowledged God’s “generous adequacy” and gave thanks.

But here is the rub: Once the Israelites (or the refugees or immigrants) enter the land and eat their fill and build fine houses and amass herds and flocks and silver and gold--once *all* they have multiplies--then, Moses warns, they will begin to exalt themselves and forget God. *Why do we do that?*

Brueggemann offers three daunting reasons we forget God in the land. The first is this: “Gifts given in abundance to the satiated do not finally [lead to] trusting gratitude but [to] complacent self-congratulations.” The not so hidden assumption in both Deuteronomic history and American history is the insistence that we get what we deserve. Specifically, the assumption in Deuteronomy is: “if you do thus and so, then God will bless you.” American history adds another layer to this assumption: “Because I have worked hard to earn everything I have, it is mine to do with as I please.” I repeat: “Gifts given in abundance to the satiated do not finally [lead to] trusting gratitude but [to] complacent self-congratulations.” I daresay these assumptions shape who we are. They literally order our common life economically, politically, socially and religiously. Therefore to proclaim joyfully, as preachers are wont to do, that you and I, in our success, are as dependent as every other child of God in this nation on God’s providence is downright un-American!

Brueggemann’s second reason we forget God in the land has everything to do with our attitude toward the pledge card we hold in our hands: “A gift kept long enough begins to seem like a possession,” he says. And his third reason follows from the second: “A gift kept long enough becomes separated in the memory of the recipient from the giver, so that the giver is forgotten.” We have kept the food, the houses, the present day versions of herds and flocks, the silver and gold, the investments and the inheritance long enough to believe that they are our possessions. The result of hard work and good behavior. Our just deserts! Therefore our giving to the church’s ministry and mission becomes a giving up of resources that are rightfully ours. In our minds, *we* become the generous ones, not God!

Here is the subtle and fatal flaw in that reasoning--fatal because, as Moses said to the Israelites, “If you do forget the Lord your God and follow others gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish.” Return, for a moment, to the boundary between wilderness and the land, between ocean and the firm and stable earth. In the wilderness, God was unambiguously the giver, the provider, the guarantor of life. In the wilderness manna was “bread they had never seen, could not explain, and were to never possess”: a gift that turned them in gratitude toward the Giver. They were practicing what it would look like to be God’s people in the land. But once in the land, even though God continues to be the giver, the provider, the guarantor of life, we soon think that what we have is *self-generated*, turning us to laud autonomy over dependence, self-exultation over gratitude. Now as Moses feared, God’s gift of bread leads us to exalt ourselves and forget God. I repeat: “Gifts without givers become property and occasions for self-enhancement.” To wit: God forbid that a tithe, a tenth of God’s gift returned to God in gratitude, might diminish *our* possessions, *our* financial security, *our* children’s future prosperity. *Mark Moses’ words well:* no society and certainly no church can survive for very long as a collection of autonomous, self-exalting creatures.

But if that’s the rub, here’s the gospel: nevertheless and in spite of being forgotten, God continues to give. Like a mother continues to provide food, shelter, guidance, discipline, and support to the child, even though the child may never turn toward her in gratitude (if you have not seen the movie *Ladybird, go!*), so without counting the cost, God provides everything to God’s entitled brood. God’s assumption is not “if/then” but because/therefore. Because I love you, therefore I give to you my Son, my only Son, my beloved. “Thanks be to God,” Paul exclaimed, “for his indescribable gift!”

Perhaps on this Thursday next, we would do well to begin at Christ’s table. Begin by breaking a common loaf of bread and sharing a common cup of wine, thanking God for the indescribable gift of love in Jesus Christ, from whom every blessing flows. The rest is gravy. Amen.