

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Return to Praise"
Dr. J. Dent

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Thanksgiving Sunday

God uses crises. No one currently is bold enough to say where the current world financial crisis is going. It is easy to see the fiscal irresponsibility of the American banks, lending institutions, and government to spend at the rate it has been spending. But what we see again is the linkages between the U.S. and all other international financial institutions. Iceland has been particularly hard hit, and has made application to the International Monetary Fund for remedies. Our own dollar was hard hit this week.

But you didn't come for an economic lesson this morning. They say that we will never again see a Great Depression that my mother saw and some of you had the fortune or misfortune to live through. Financial planners always use the charts that begin in 1950 and show the tremendous upswing since that time until today. What they don't show you is the late 1920s or depressions before that. That was a time where banks closed, where widespread unemployment took place, where families were worried about being housed and fed.

My mother, whom some of you have met now, tells me about the day her father lost his job and the two borders they took in make ends meet for three years of her father's unemployment. I suppose I want to make the point of this Great Depression era, not to scare you about the current one we are entering, but rather to encourage you to put your faith anew in God.

We may lose our pensions and financial portfolios, I don't know. We may lose our jobs and our financial security. One thing I do know: God helped people survive the Great Depression. The church survived. Families survived. But everyone needed to make a correction about expecting the abundance to always be there. Perhaps you have your own stories to tell about those years. I encourage you to tell them to whoever will listen.

God knows abundance can set us up to forget God, for spiritual amnesia. That's why he allowed the writers of Scripture to preserve Deuteronomy 8, which we read every Thanksgiving. Remember the words:
10 When you have eaten your fill, be sure to praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you.

11 “But that is the time to be careful! Beware that in your plenty you do not forget the Lord your God and disobey his commands, regulations, and decrees that I am giving you today. 12 For when you have become full and prosperous and have built fine homes to live in, 13 and when your flocks and herds have become very large and your silver and gold have multiplied along with everything else, be careful! 14 Do not become proud at that time and forget the Lord your God, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt. 15 Do not forget that he led you through the great and terrifying wilderness with its poisonous snakes and scorpions, where it was so hot and dry. He gave you water from the rock! 16 He fed you with manna in the wilderness, a food unknown to your ancestors. He did this to humble you and test you for your own good. 17 He did all this so you would never say to yourself, ‘I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy.’ 18 Remember the Lord your God. He is the one who gives you power to be successful... (New Living Translation)

That's what Thanksgiving is about: remembering God. This is as relational a holiday as Christmas or Easter, maybe even more so, because as soon as you give any reflection to the concept of thanks, it is always directed to a person. To whom are you thankful? Then we begin to remember that all of life is a gift. Where is that gift from? Our children are a gift. Our health is a gift. Even our resources are a gift, regardless of how hard we think we have worked for them or not. In a time where we may lose a lot of these resources, we are encouraged again to look to the source of life. Maybe we are scared about what's going to happen to us financially, personally. That too is a time to offer our fear to the One who knows us, whether we have a lot or a little.

This too is a time to remember those who already have very little. It is a time to vote with the poor in mind. Who knows? We may be all very similar very soon.

Thanksgiving is a time to remember that God holds the keys to living well. What God remembers and values trumps our need for security. That's why I say over and over “you only get to keep what you give away.” I believe it is a biblical principle. The reading from 2 Corinthians reminds us that giving to others, giving to the church is a kind of planting or sowing of seed. If we only take a few seeds, we are lucky to get just a few plants. But if we want a large field of harvest, then we sow our seed, we give our givings as if we can make a difference on an eternal landscape. The Scriptures say we can make

a difference. When we give of ourselves, of our time and of our money to the church, we not only help out the Minister and his family, those who receive ministry from the church, our givings are thanksgivings (eucharist) to God. (2 Corinthians 9:12)

So if we're afraid in these days, let us direct our fear to God and become even more generous than before. Let us remember our true security is in God, and we have a great treasure in this community.

Pam Bruce put up a historical piece on Rev. Ward Siddall, who was the Minister in this congregation in 1891 to 1896. During those years, there was a fire that wiped out most of the city. I'm sure there had been no planning given to this. But Rev. Siddall housed over fifty families at that time, if I remember the details correctly. We have a great asset in our connection here, and I don't mean just what the Minister can do.

We also have a great occasion today in being thankful for this land, and this building that is just fifty years old. It was Thanksgiving 1958 that a number of members, some Ministers, and Mrs. Calver turned sod in this big empty field. Take some time to look at the historical photographs in the cabinet and the shovel she used, which has been well used since then.

We thank You, O Lord, for your mercy to us in this place. Help us to be good stewards of this building and land for You. Teach us the faith anew that they had in the early 1960s to build the Hall. Help us to risk as they did for future generations to enjoy.

Finally, Jesus was very clear in the Gospel of Luke about those ten guys who had encountered serious health crises. They had Hansen's disease, or leprosy, which affects the skin and nervous system and causes you to experience sensory loss (the loss of feeling usually in your extremities), thus opening you up to wounding yourself and burning yourself without knowing it and the corresponding health problems. It is often used in Scripture as a picture for sin, and what sin does to you.

Many of us have health problems which should drive us to the Lord for prayer and intervention. Many of us have many other crises which should drive us to the Lord for prayer and intervention.

And by the way, if you are looking for some fascinating and helpful reading in a novel format. Try *The Shack* by Paul Young. It is a novel of a man who is met by God in the midst of his crisis. It would be an excellent conversation piece both inside the church and outside it. I recommend it to you, and I don't recommend books often. In fact, Eugene Peterson, who translated the Scriptures and was a professor at Regent College and was a Presbyterian Minister in the States for more than thirty years considers it on a par with Pilgrim's Progress...high praise indeed, not to mention it has sold over two million copies.

But back to those guys with Hansen's disease. All ten knew how desperate they were. All ten cried out for help. All ten went to see the priest. So these are not men who unable to get help, not men who are passive, not men who have never seen God at work. They received a miraculous healing. They received a positive answer to their greatest personal life crisis. But they lacked one thing.

They lacked the relationship with Jesus Christ that issued forth in thanks to God. That is the key to Christianity. They knew what they needed. They got what they needed. But once your crisis is over, then what? I suppose I can say the same thing about the current financial crisis. If it is over on Tuesday, then what? Is it back to the greed, back to the abundance, back to not ever learning the lessons God intends for us to learn about generosity, about community, about the kingdom of God being worked out inside you and me, if you read on Luke 17 you will see that.

We pray the Lord's prayer regularly here, and some do at home. Did you ever think about that prayer in light of God transforming you to show Himself real to others? That is community transformation, as well as personal change.

We all get to vote on Tuesday. I do hope you can do so with a sense of thanksgiving, with a prayer that whoever governs, whoever is in opposition, whether a minority or a majority, may God open hearts and minds to God's priorities for those governing and all the others in the House.

And when you sit around the Thanksgiving table today or tomorrow, take that moment to share one item of thanksgiving each. Continue the worship of God at your family tables and in your community.

Let us pray.