

Thanksgiving Eve Deut. 26: 1-11 Phil. 4: 4-9 Jo. 6: 25-35
+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

Now honestly, when was the last time you said to yourself, “I need a good book to break up the monotony. I want something exciting, mysterious, bold, inviting, and captivating to gather all my attention, or maybe, in a more self-reflective moment and mood, an autobiography of an uplifting spiritual journey that would resonate and motivate you. And then...you went out and picked up a copy of Deuteronomy and soaked up the pages!!! Just a little light entertainment. ON the other hand you could start out with WAR and Peace by Tolstoy.

Here we are at Thanksgiving, a time of gathering in warmth and joy, and the OT lesson is from Deuteronomy-literally the Second Law. Most of the book comes from one author, and it is comprised of a series of little sermons, and they aren't light hearted. There is a lot of “you shall” spoken here, but very little “let's party”. What, if anything would this ancient text, have to say to us about our Thanksgiving gathering or life in a complex society?

Nestled in the midst of instructions about offerings and baskets handed to the priest, and liturgical responses to be said, there runs and flows a stream, which is worth navigating. The brook which meanders through this text is both a simple, quiet pool, and at the same time, contains layers and levels that run rapid and deep. Distilled, it is just this—look behind the **goods/events/path** of your life, and see if you can perceive the **giver** of life, and **DO NOT CONFUSE THE TWO!!** The text voices it in an alien phrase for us: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived as an alien...When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us...the Lord heard our voice...and brought us out with a mighty hand.” That line was used in the worship liturgy and repeated over and over again, because it sums up the journey people of faith walk, AND it keeps clear and in memory that we have stepped into a stream with others, who like us, know life is a gift not created by ourselves.

At least two things evolve from these words as they reflect truthfully our movement through life. The first is a warning, and the second an invitation.

The warning here is not to objectify the gifts and judge life by whether there is plenty or scarcity; comfort or struggle. The words spoken to a people who had been 400 years in slavery is this segment of the journey does not define their value or who they are. When you and I come to a time in life when our physical well-being fails to keep pace with our ability to live, or when our cognitive function alters, or the moments of comfort are less than those of pain, what does that mean? Put another way, is the value of our lives defined by gifts and goods lacking or available to us, or is there something more? “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...who brought us out of bondage.” Has God been, and does God continue to be faithful in providing for the world the resources necessary for fullness of life? (The distribution and stewardship of that is another question) The warning is to not place our sights on false certitude or to bemoan the struggles we encounter.

The **invitation** here is to see that the gifts of life are not our own making, and as we offer thanks we are in fact saying the gifts are a continuation of the faithfulness of the One who made us,

sustains us, and stands with us in good or in ill. A year or so ago, I had travelled to a meeting in Charlottesville, Virginia to administer examinations to folks who thought ministry might be their vocation. I had to leave prior to the conclusion in order to be with my spouse as we were to receive the results of several MRI's due to unknown neurological issues. It was one of the longest drives/days of my life. On the way a stop was made in a little town in the Shenandoah Valley, Amherst, to get fuel and water. Looking across the street, the county's historical museum was spotted, and so I entered for a few moments. The curator asked if she could help, and I told her my seventh great-grandfather and his children had owned land in the area in the 1750s, having landed in Philadelphia in 1736, and wondered if there were any records of them. "Oh yes", she said..."they were on Rutland Creek, about a mile from here. Can you imagine what it must have been like for them in those days having come across the sea, settling in unknown territory, and not having a clue what the future would bring? There was no medical care and travelling was completely uncertain. You would not know what was just around the bend." "Yes, I can", I whispered to myself", as I thought about the uncertainty on my own life. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor", who came through unimagined challenges, and to whom God was faithful even as he was an alien. I suspect we are no different.

Today we are invited to look over our shoulders and see not only the wonderful gifts that we possess, but also not to delude ourselves into confusing those gifts with the giver. We have stepped into the same stream as countless faithful others have and we can recount how it is that God has carried us out of brokenness and bondage and fear into places where hope glimmers.

The Gospel from John echoes this same message. Jesus recognizes that people have followed him because they got food and a little entertainment along the way. And he invites them, along with us, not to labor (that is spend our life energy) on what cannot last or sustain us, but on the Bread of Life. Like Deuteronomy that calls people to join the long collective history of God's people, Jesus today invites us to recognize, join with, and receive a profound reality—God's heart is a heart of unlimited generosity, and while he owns everything, God withholds nothing in loving us. Amen+