

In their footsteps

Exodus 19:1-8

November 20, 2005

*"Thank you for a nice evening --
we must do it again, sometime."
"Thanks for the present -- it was very nice."
"Sincerely yours ..."
"Thank You, God, for health, for life, for whatever ... amen."*

*O God, who of us does not mouth such
kempt
precedented
underwhelming gratuities?
Who of us doesn't sense how very shallow they are?
For even we
have known those moments
those shining experiences
when gratitude was not a stifling obligation
but an ecstatic necessity
a joy
a delight
when our very souls were grateful
to be alive
to learn
to love
to wonder
to say. "AH!"*

*(Better Than Nice, a prayer taken from the book, *Better Than Nice and Other Unconventional Prayers*, by Frederick Ohler)*

When our very souls were grateful to be alive to learn to love to wonder to say, "AH!"

This is what thanksgiving is about ... not making lists, not counting blessings, but saying, "AH!" When we make lists, when we count blessings, we are left with some troubling questions.

If my list is longer than yours, if I have more blessings to count than you do, does that mean that God has been better to me, that God loves me more, that I have more reason to be thankful than you do?

I may thank God for the blessing of good health, but what if tomorrow I discover I have diabetes or Parkinson's disease or cancer? Will that mean that God has abandoned me? Will I have less reason tomorrow to give thanks to God than I have today?

I may thank God for the blessing of family, but what if your parents are divorced? What if you don't talk to your sister anymore? What if your husband has died? Does that mean when the time comes for giving thanks, you won't have very much to say?

We may thank God for the blessing of living in peace, but what if that peace is threatened -- by the spread of terrorism, by the specter of a global pandemic, by the growing scarcity of resources upon which our way of life depends? Does that mean that God is not with us after all?

That was the question the people of Israel asked when they faced hunger and thirst in the desert as they made their way from Egypt to the land of Canaan: *Is the Lord with us or not?*

The desert is a hard place, the way through the desert is filled with difficulty and danger, but there in the desert the people of Israel learned that the Lord was with them. It is in the desert, in the hard places, in the hard times, that we learn to see things clearly, that we learn not to count but to trust, not to be thankful for some thing, but to be thankful for some One.

When we peel back the layers one by one, all the layers of the things of our lives, things that come and go, things of which at any given moment we may have more or less, things which some of us may have and others of us may never have, when we finally peel away the last layer and reach the core -- the core of what we have, the core of what we have to be thankful for -- we are left with this:

You, Lord, are all I have, and you give me all I need.

This is the *AH!* This is what thanksgiving is about ... not having this or that thing, but having the Lord with us, in every circumstance, at every moment, having the Lord with us. So don't be afraid of what the future may hold, don't turn aside from the path God has called you to follow even when that path is difficult and dangerous. There are many who have followed that path ahead of you ...

[Conversations with three "travelers" traversing a "path" laid out across the sanctuary chancel:]

- A young man of Israel, among those making their way through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan.



- A Pilgrim mother, among those coming to the New World from England.



- A founder of First Congregational Church of Waterloo.



We walk in their footsteps ...

We walk in the footsteps of the founders of this church. In the midst of a most difficult and dangerous time in our nation's history, they came together to form a new community of believers in a new town, a community of believers dedicated to each other, dedicated to justice, dedicated to human freedom, dedicated to the Lord. As they made covenant with each other and laid the foundation upon which we build today, they affirmed their categorical opposition to the institution of slavery and their commitment to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors in the faith:

We wish to adhere to the faith of our fathers, because a departure from it by so many of our brethren has injured the cause of truth ...

May we continue to walk in their footsteps, maintaining an unwavering commitment to justice and to human freedom, seeking as they did to do the will of God in our time and place, working together to advance the cause of truth.

We walk in the footsteps of our pilgrim forebears. In a unfamiliar land, beautiful but forbidding, in the face of disease and a harsh climate and the death of so many among their families, having experienced both scarcity and plenty in this new world, they gathered to celebrate a good harvest and to acknowledge God's goodness to them. From the beginning, they made this mutual commitment as Governor Bradford remembers it:

... to walk in all [God's] ways, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.

May we continue to walk in their footsteps, the footsteps of the men and women who brought the congregational way to the New World. May we acknowledge God's goodness to us, trust in God's providence even in times of uncertainty and scarcity, and pledge ourselves to walk in God's ways -- with God's help -- whatever the cost.

We walk in the footsteps of the people of Israel. God rescued them, God brought them safely through the wilderness, God carried them as an eagle carries her young on her wings bringing them to Sinai to make them his own people. There at the foot of Mount Sinai they listen as Moses gives them God's message:

If you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own people. The whole earth is mine, but you will be my chosen people, a people dedicated to me alone ...

They listen, and they look back remembering all God has done to bring them this far, and they look ahead trying to imagine a land they have never seen and all the dangers that lie along the way, and they say to Moses:

We will do everything that the Lord has said...

May we continue to walk in their footsteps, recognizing that God alone has made us what we are, that God alone has brought us safe thus far and God alone will lead us home, dedicating ourselves to God alone, choosing to live as the Lord's own people and to do everything that the Lord has said.

We will face our own challenges, our own hardships, our own dangers and toils and snares, but the road we follow is the same road they followed, and the One who was with them, every step of the way, is the One who is with us, every step of the way. So with courage and with hope and with faith, let us choose to walk in their footsteps ...