

## Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it and settle in it, <sup>2</sup>take some of the first ripe produce that you harvest from the soil of the land that the LORD your God is giving you. Put it in a basket, and go to the place where the LORD your God will choose to establish his name. <sup>3</sup>Go to the priest who is presiding at that time and say to him, “Today I declare before the LORD your God that I have come to the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to give to us.” <sup>4</sup>The priest will take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God.

<sup>5</sup>Then you will respond and say in the presence of the LORD your God, “My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien with just a few people, but there he became a great, strong, and populous nation. <sup>6</sup>The Egyptians mistreated and afflicted us. They imposed hard labor on us. <sup>7</sup>We cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and he saw our affliction, our labor, and oppression. <sup>8</sup>The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and with great awe-inspiring acts and signs and wonders. <sup>9</sup>He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>So now, look as I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you have given me, LORD.”

Then set the basket down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. <sup>11</sup>Then you, as well as the Levite and the alien who resides among you, will rejoice in all the good things that the LORD your God has given to you and your household.

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## The Land Flowing with Milk and Honey

### I.

Only a shell of the original group was left to gather together. When they first arrived, there had been over 100 people, but they landed in late Fall, and there were no houses ready for them to move into. Through the harsh winter most of them lived on the boat they had arrived on. There were no climate control systems to regulate the temperature to their liking. Sanitary conditions were not good. They didn't have enough food. On and on went the challenges the little group endured.

When spring came, around half of them had died. Some of the natives from the barren landscape around them came and greeted them and taught them what kind of crop management worked in their area. They learned. They survived. During the course of that first full year, things improved a bit, but not all that much. They tried a share and share alike concept, but some among them were slacking off and everyone was affected.

The next year each family of the little community was given their own plot of land and encouraged to produce as much as they were able. Finally the community flourished. The people poured their hearts and souls into producing whatever they could for their individual families. Now they found they had an abundance. They set up trading posts with the Indians. When Fall arrived, and the harvest was tremendous, and they were flourishing, the Pilgrims decided to have a feast and give thanks to God for preserving them through all the hardship and blessing them. Their neighbors, the Indians—we now call them Native Americans—were invited to join them in giving thanks.

It is nearly 400 years since the first Thanksgiving celebration in what had been termed the New World. How much have things changed?

Food was a prominent feature in that first Thanksgiving. It still is, of course. These days we have come up with a bunch of foods that have now been dubbed the “traditional” Thanksgiving meal: Turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, stuffing, cranberries, green bean casserole and, of course, desert—pumpkin pie. These days Thanksgiving preparations include what recipes we want to try for this or that dish. Should the turkey be baked in the oven, fried in a roaster, smoked, or cooked some other unique way? Does your family want the so-called traditional batches of foods, or do you want to try something new and different? Most importantly of all—just how much food can each person consume?

It wasn't quite that way for the Pilgrims at the first Thanksgiving in the New World. There had been no well-stocked grocery stores to greet them when they first arrived in Plymouth. Their first winter had been cold and damp and there had been very little to eat. When they planned their first Thanksgiving celebration it was really a harvest festival. The primary reason they wanted to stop and give thanks to God was that their harvest had been enough that there was ample food to keep them from starving. There was food enough for all. That hadn't been the case the previous year. For that, they gave thanks.

Just a few miles south of here, some of the people in our sister congregation in Hopkins perhaps think about harvest time a bit more than we do here in the suburbs. For us, fields and farms are the stuff of social studies, not of every day life. Food is a constant for us. We don't have to think about it all that much. Deep down we know that food *must* grow, but it just seems to *appear* on the grocery store shelves.

## II.

Moses had a Thanksgiving sermon for the people of Israel as they waited with great anticipation to enter the Promised Land. They were a bit like the Pilgrims. The land beckoned to them with opportunity. The possibilities seemed endless. It was a good land. God had promised that it would be a land flowing with milk and honey—a land of plenty. Moses' sermon was to remind them they were not to forget who had given them this land—who blessed their labors as they worked this new land.

At *their* thanksgiving—their harvest festival—the Israelite people were instructed to recite their history. Moses told them:

Then you will respond and say in the presence of the LORD your God, “My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien with just a few people, but there he became a great, strong, and populous nation. <sup>6</sup>The Egyptians mistreated and afflicted us. They imposed hard labor on us. <sup>7</sup>We cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and he saw our affliction, our labor, and oppression. <sup>8</sup>The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and with great awe-inspiring acts and signs and wonders. <sup>9</sup>He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Deuteronomy 26:5-9, EHV).

The history of Israel's time in Egypt was not to be put on a shelf, never to be spoken of again. While in Egypt, God's people thought they had been abandoned by God. They thought he didn't see their plight. But God *did* see. God saved them. Now, at the harvest festival, look at all this food! God has filled our hands with the evidence of his great mercy.

Thank you, Lord.

How easy it is to forget. How easy to forget how good things are in our country. How easy to forget times of hunger and hurt. Remember your ancestors and the times of need they endured. Remember the years you yourself endured when the pickings were slim. When things are good, it is all too easy to forget the hard times of the past and fail to give thanks. Thanksgiving for plenty begins with remembering need.

In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul said: “The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly” (2 Corinthians 9:6, EHV). Farmers understand. The bread we eat comes from ground up seeds. If you grind *all* the seeds and eat it as bread, there will be nothing to plant the next year. The same is true for other crops.

The warning for us is that even while giving thanks there must be discipline for the future. Some of the harvest must be saved, so that it can be planted for the *next* year’s harvest.

### III.

As they entered the Promised Land, Moses was telling the people that there would be many, many years that were years of abundance. When the harvest came in, it was appropriate for the people to praise and thank the Lord of the harvest, who made it possible.

When you enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it and settle in it, <sup>2</sup>take some of the first ripe produce that you harvest from the soil of the land that the LORD your God is giving you. Put it in a basket, and go to the place where the LORD your God will choose to establish his name. <sup>3</sup>Go to the priest who is presiding at that time and say to him, “Today I declare before the LORD your God that I have come to the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to give to us.” <sup>4</sup>The priest will take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God (Deuteronomy 26:1-4, EHV).

For most people in 2019, life is pretty good. The unemployment rate is historically low. While the minimum wage hasn’t changed all that much, many employers are finding it necessary to pay well *above* the minimum to find and retain quality employees.

The good news goes much deeper than that, of course. While we give thanks for the many blessings God has given us to provide for our physical needs, there is one need that is even greater that we haven’t mentioned yet today.

The greatest gift God gave to his Old Testament people of Israel was that he was preserving alive the line of the Savior when he brought them into the Promised Land. The greatest gift he has given *us* in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is that he kept alive the line of the Savior, and then brought the Savior into the world. Jesus came to us and for us. Jesus gave himself as the sacrifice for all our sins that held us in slavery to sin. Jesus planted the seed of faith in our hearts and watered it with the gospel so it continued to flourish and grow, even to this moment in time.

Rejoice at Thanksgiving that the Lord has provided us with so many material blessings, but that he has given us even greater gifts than these. Thank you, Lord, for the good things you have provided for our tables tomorrow. Thank you for the good things you have given for our daily lives. Thank you, Lord, for the gift of Jesus, who brought us salvation. Amen.