

A Voice of Thanksgiving

1 Chronicles 16:8-12; Psalm 95:1-8; Philippians 4:4-7

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In a few days we will celebrate one of the great American holidays. It isn't that we are not a thankful people during the rest of the year; it's just that on one of the days of the year our focus is on how much we have for which we are thankful.

Sarah Josepha Hale was the advocate for the modern Thanksgiving holiday that we observe. As an editor of a magazine, she had written articles proposing such a holiday for over 30 years. She believed that such a day of thanksgiving would help to unify the Northern and Southern states amid their gathering division. Even though the Civil War had begun, President Lincoln wrote a proclamation officially creating Thanksgiving Day in 1863.

But... the call to celebrate with thanksgiving began a long time ago. The Book of Psalms was the hymn book for the Second Temple. Much like our modern hymnal, there were songs for various occasions, chants for worship, liturgy, and historic creeds.

The Psalm that was read this morning is a congregational hymn, perhaps a processional hymn, that would have been sung as the people prepared to enter the Temple for worship. The second half of the Psalm might have been read or proclaimed to the worshipers by a priest or a second choir after the people had entered the Temple.

The second half of the Psalm is a reminder of the actions of their ancestors' disobedience to God and was, and is, a cautionary prophecy to the listeners and to all who would later read the words. This morning, this Sunday before Thanksgiving Day, I want to not ignore the second part, but to focus on the first. I want to focus on our thankfulness to our great God.

The theme of the first part of the Psalm is praise and thanksgiving to their God,

- the Creator of heaven and earth,
- the Creator of the heights and the depths,
- the Creator of everything that dwells therein.

This would have been a fitting Psalm to have been sung on the occasion of the Feast of the Harvest when the people brought the first fruits of their labors from what they had sown in their fields. It would have been a fitting Psalm to have been sung on the occasion of the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year. Because of the many crops that were grown in Israel, there were many seasons of harvest throughout the year.

As the procession of people enters the Temple, they are reminded by the words they sing that they are in the presence of an awesome God. It is appropriate to bow and kneel in God's presence. As they come with their thanksgiving they remember their history.

Much like them, we tell our stories year after year about

- how we went to the grandparents' home for the day,
- how the turkey was or wasn't so good,

- how, if you were in a warmer climate, there was always a touch football game after the meal,
- how everyone took a turkey nap while watching the endless number of football games.

They would also recite what great things God had done for them;

- redeeming them out of slavery,
- providing for them in the wilderness,
- bringing them into the Promised Land,
- preserving them as a people, even while in exile in Babil
- restoring them in their homeland.

They praise God as though all of these experiences had been personally theirs. They praise God not only as individuals, but as a nation. God has taken on the role of a Shepherd for them, watching over them, protecting them, providing their needs for them.

In some areas of this country sheep ranching is better understood than other areas. When I served in the Rocky Mountain Region for American Baptists, a part of that region was Wyoming. Sheep ranching is a major industry there. Even in this modern age, I would sometimes see a shepherd's wagon parked in a field.

The shepherd lived there with the sheep, watching over them, helping them to birth their lambs in the Spring, leading them to where there was more grass to eat, making sure that they had water to drink. The shepherd was there to circle them in close in the night and make sure that they were not harmed. The shepherd provides healing ointment when the sheep are wounded. The shepherd rescues when they wander away. The shepherd's one purpose in life is to care for the sheep that have been entrusted to him or her.

Centuries later, we who follow Jesus would hear Him say, "I am the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep." Jesus moves the relationship of Shepherd and sheep to a divine covenant between Himself and those who would follow Him. The Creator of heaven and earth, of the heights and depths, and of everything that dwells therein has made a covenant with us

- to stand with us and strengthen us when we are attacked by that which we cannot control;
- to care for us when our world seems turned upside down;
- to provide healing and help and hope when we find ourselves wounded and crippled and plowed under by the events of life.

If we know anything about the people of Israel who were going up to the Temple to sing praises to God, we know that their lives were not without difficulty, but they came to praise the Lord anyway.

Paul had something to say about our daily attitude of thanksgiving and praise. You heard it read this morning: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice." These words were made into a chorus. Listen as they are sung and then we are going to sing them together.

On each day of this week, I invite you to write down at least one blessing for which you are thankful. On this Thanksgiving holiday, as you enjoy that simple meal or that elegant feast, find a way to share how blessed you are and truly give thanks.

Who knows? Maybe by being thankful people, we too shall find unity in our diversity.
Amen.