

Bishop's Reflection

UNWRAPPING THE PRESENT OF THANKSGIVING

A Spiritual Reflection for Thanksgiving

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As a direct descendent of Samuel Jordan, an “ancient planter” and one of the early settlers of colonial Jamestown in the early 17th century, our family is particularly sensitive to the manner in which we celebrate Thanksgiving. For we know that the land they established their colony upon was already the home of the Powhatan people, an eastern Algonquian tribe.

I am reminded of how Kisha James, a member of the Aquinnah Wampanoag tribe in New England, expressed that she does not object to Thanksgiving gatherings, but rather “to the false mythology surrounding the day.” How appropriate that the day after Thanksgiving is now designated as Native American Heritage Day, a civil holiday where we acknowledge the contributions that the First Americans made and continue to make to the U.S. So, while making sure we remember what was done to Native peoples, we acknowledge that more than ever, a spirit of thanksgiving is genuinely needed in today’s society. There is perhaps no better time for us to “unwrap the present of thanksgiving”: the *present* in the sense of time, the here and now; and a *present* in the sense of a gift, a gift that begins to unwrap this new season.

Our annual North American festival of Thanksgiving is a tradition that dates back to October 1621, when the Plymouth Pilgrims, coming from England on the Mayflower, observed a holiday feast for three days with the local Wampanoag tribe, who had helped them survive by planting corn, to thank God and celebrate their survival after a rugged New England winter. A Thanksgiving celebration was observed from that time on intermittently until President Abraham Lincoln, in 1863, established an annual Thanksgiving Day as a national holiday. It was much later, during the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, that the date of Thanksgiving was established as the fourth Thursday of November.

Thanksgiving and gratitude are intrinsic to the Christian faith. As the early 20th century English writer, G.K. Chesterton, wrote, “Gratitude is the mother of all virtues.” However, often some wonder how they can give thanks in the midst of their present situation, when their reality, whatever it may be, does not seem to easily lend itself toward thankfulness. Certainly, in a world riven with wars, natural disasters, disease, injustices of all sorts, perhaps nothing is more radical or countercultural than to live with a spirit of gratitude.

I have always been struck by the power of Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh’s painting titled *The Potato Eaters*. One day, in visiting an impoverished miner’s family just as they sat down to eat around the table, van Gogh had a mystical illuminating “vision” of divine presence in the midst of their human tragedy. And he set about to paint that scene with an obsession. It was his first large-scale composition, painted at the age of 32, in 1885. In the painting, he attempted to suggest God’s presence in the midst of the family’s hardship. The resultant

painting powerfully emphasizes the nuances of darkness in their lives, representing their suffering, while at the same time it is permeated with light, symbolizing God in their midst. In the painting we see how “blessed” this family is and how thankful they are, in spite of their circumstances. Reflecting on his spiritual journey, van Gogh says, “It was not in vain that I spent so many evenings at the houses of the miners.”



THE POTATO EATERS
BY VINCENT VAN GOGH (1885)

Expressing gratitude to the Transcendent, especially after times of harvest, is as old as recorded history. Throughout history, many cultures have given thanks to God or their deity for a bountiful harvest. The ancient Greeks, Romans, Hebrews and Chinese held thanksgiving celebrations, with the oldest of all recorded thanksgiving celebrations being in Egypt. The Egyptians celebrated a thanksgiving for their springtime harvest, expressing gratitude to their god Min, the god of vegetation. The festival featured a parade in which the Pharaoh himself took part, together with music and dancing. Today, the spirit of thanksgiving, which often centers on the local harvest, is found in cultures all over the world, from Chusok in Korea, to Succoth in Israel, to Pongal in India, to the Yam Festival in Nigeria and Ghana, and so on.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish people had several festivals of thanksgiving built into their liturgical and national calendar. One of their most prominent, with which we are all familiar, was the annual celebration of Passover. It is a festival that helps us relate to our Thanksgiving tradition in whatever state of being we may find ourselves - regardless of our present reality. The first celebration of their Passover, when the Hebrews began to celebrate their deliverance from captivity in Egypt, is an event that helps us “unwrap the present of thanksgiving.”

For hundreds of years they had been in bondage. And just one year after what became known as their Exodus, they were called upon to celebrate Passover while out in the Sinai Desert. The purpose of that first Passover celebration, that thanksgiving event, was to be a reminder to the next generation and the next, and for generations to come, that God was a God of deliverance. Interestingly, they were told to set this time aside for a celebration of thanksgiving *while* they were still in the desert. Their present reality was still one not far from despair. They had years of journeying in the desert before them. Yet, they thanked God for God’s protection and

faithfulness *in the past* – for they had made it through the recent plagues and out of Egypt. Even if the only thing they could be thankful for was that they had survived.

Unwrapping the present of thanksgiving this season means remembering God's faithfulness to each of us in the past. In this sense, gratitude is the heart's memory. All too often, as the French novelist Albert Camus wrote, "Man's first faculty is forgetting." The remembrance of God's faithfulness to us in the past gives us hope in our present reality, no matter the circumstances we face. The past is always a living part of the present.

Historians tell us that because of the tragic losses, those first Plymouth Pilgrims nearly established a day of mourning and fasting rather than a day of gratitude. After all, of the 120 people that came over on the Mayflower, half died that first winter from starvation and disease. Approximately half of those on the Mayflower were known as Separatists from the Church of England, whom we associate as the Pilgrims today. The other half on the ship were Anglican entrepreneurs very much with the English establishment. So, the tension was inevitably great. Yet, it was almost because of these difficulties that they decided to celebrate out of gratitude to God. For they had survived amidst the stiffest odds together. It is worth noting that even our country was not at any kind of financial or emotional peak at the time of President Lincoln's famous Thanksgiving Proclamation. Because of the civil war, the country was at an ebb, in a state of ruin. Still, President Lincoln recognized the need to give thanks to God for helping them through so far.

St. Paul's exhortation "in everything give thanks," doesn't mean not to feel sorrow, loss, pain or hardship. However, unwrapping each of our pasts and finding God's ever-present faithfulness there can enable us to receive the present of thanksgiving in the hardest of times.

The Hebrews, celebrating their Thanksgiving festival, in the midst of captivity, not only relied on the past, but they also clung to the promise of the future. They clung to the hope of the Promised Land, a land where their needs would be fully met. Unwrapping the present of thanksgiving means looking to our future hope. Names given to those first towns established, such as New Haven and New Hope, say everything we need to know. Providence, Concord, Salem (which is *Shalom*, the Peace of God). The same could be said about those towns around the world named Freetown, Libreville, or Dar Es Salaam (City of Peace), and so many other places whose names are full of hope and vision. They all reflect God's greatest promises to us. While many of those dreams are still just that, dreams, they speak of a future hope, of a home seen not in dreams but in the deepest of spiritual visions. For in our final home, where the ultimate of Thanksgivings will take place, we will be served by the ultimate of Hosts – none other than our beautiful Creator.

Unwrapping the present of this thanksgiving is an acknowledgment that no matter what, God has brought us through so far – that we are never alone or separated from God's active presence. The past and the future, memory and expectation, allow us to give thanks in the present.

Being reminded of this, may we offer to God grateful hearts as we celebrate Thanksgiving this year. And may our prayer be that of George Herbert's, the 17th century Anglican poet-priest, when he wrote; "You have given so much to me. Give me one thing more - a grateful heart."

Take hope,
+ Paul-Gordon