

"THANKFUL FOR THE HERE AND NOW"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

Most of us recall from our Sunday School days that Moses grew up as a child in a palace in Egypt after the princess had discovered him in the bullrushes. We remember, too, how in anger he killed an Egyptian taskmaster because of his cruel treatment of a Jewish slave. He then escaped into the desert, married and kept the flock of his father-in-law as he tried to forget the terrible treatment of his people. He brooded over this oppression and wondered if God had really forgotten His people and why someone did not do something.

Suddenly, you may recall from your days in Sunday School, that an answer came to him and it came in all places from a burning bush. Moses heard a voice speaking directly to him. "Moses, put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground". In other words, God was saying something like this to Moses:

"Stop where you are Moses. Don't look back and grumble or feel sorry for yourself. Here is the place and now is the moment. This is your time, your opportunity. This is Holy Ground. Be grateful for this moment, this time, this hour"

DEVELOPMENT

On this Sunday before our National Day of Thanksgiving, it seems appropriate and important that we spend a few moments reflecting upon the message of the Burning Bush. Thanksgiving is a time to recall and to glorify the past as well as to attempt to engender hope for the future. Surely this is good, for we are grateful for the heritage that is ours. And yet, there is a danger for some living in the past, who like to bask in the "Good Old Days", which really makes impossible the full life of the "here and the now".

On occasion I find myself in conversation with some old time New Yorkers who tell me what a glorious place New York City use to be. There were no crowds back then, no traffic problems, no grid-lock, no air or water pollution, fewer dogs, no sanitation or transit strikes, no muggings in the park. The schools were better, the streets cleaner and Manhattan was the place (unless you lived in Brooklyn), Manhattan was the only place to live, while today many people are moving from the city and escaping to the suburbs. To hear these old timers talk - to live in New York City back then in those "good old days" must have been terrific.

The tendency to look back longingly at the past and to look at it through rose-tinted glasses is something most of us do at one time or another.

Carlyle had a comment on how bright the future could look and how rosy the past seemed. He felt it was because fear had been extracted from both of them. The future troubles are far away...which makes them less feared, and the past so remote that we have forgotten the troubles and the tensions and the headaches and the fears of those days. Both the future and the past become satisfying illusions while the present confronts us with fearful realities.

So it was with Moses when called by God to face the realities of the "here and the now" in his time. God declared, "Now is the time, Moses - not yesterday or tomorrow - but here and now - today! Now is the time to release my people". But Moses declined, "Who am I to go down to confront the Pharaoh? I'm not ready for that."

How often we fail to appreciate the meaning of the present moment in which we live. We become so busy and so taken up with other things that we fail to appreciate the glory of the present.

I'm always reminded of that touching scene in Thornton Wilder's Our Town. Emily, the young bride who had died in childbirth was permitted to go back to her home in Grover's Corners and relive her 12th birthday. The experience was so disillusioning. Everybody - mother, father, sisters, brothers - all seemed so busy, so preoccupied, no time to stop, to notice, to feel, to realize life and to enjoy it while they were living it. "Oh momma" she cried. "Just look at me one moment as if you really saw me..just for a moment we're all together. Momma, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another".

CONDITIONED FOR THE FUTURE

Living in the past or preparing for the future, and as a result we miss the glory of the present moment. There's something in our way of life that seems to always be conditioning us for the future. We never seem to feel like we're ready to live the "here and the now".

You know how it is: we are educated and trained to get ready for the next step, the next stage, the next grade. In high school, it's get ready for college; in college, for the first job or graduate school. We prepare ourselves to be established in the community. Then we work hard to buy life insurance for our family to protect the future. Then we start to think about saving for the days of retirement. Then, if we live in a certain part of the country, we see those big bill boards that say, "prepare to meet thy God". So much of life is spent preparing for the next step.

Somebody once wrote a brief biography of the American businessman and summed it up in this one sentence:

"He was born in the country where he worked like the dickens so that he could move to the city where he worked like the dickens so he could move to the country".

How tragic, how said it is always to be caught on this treadmill, preparing for the next phase of life and never having the time or the serenity to sit back and enjoy the present. The Psalmist of Israel put it this way long ago:

"This is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it".

Let us then be thankful for this day, for this time, for this moment, for this city. This is, indeed, holy ground!

GRATEFUL FOR THE HERE AND NOW

This is why this morning I would like to bring Thanksgiving Day out of the past and more into the present, to encourage you to be grateful for "the here and the now".

Looking back to that first Thanksgiving celebration of 1621, when Governor William Bradford declared the first one for the Pilgrims at Plymouth, the pilgrim fathers did not celebrate the good old days in the "old country". Not at

all. Nor did they have a bright future into which they could project their dreams of better days. The present was surrounded with adversity and with poverty and fear and uncertainty. Yet, they thanked God for the blessings of the present and also for His presence - then and there. They believed God to be in their midst, using them especially in their trials, to create in their day a new life in a new land. "Put off your shoes from your feet for the place on which you stand is holy ground."

We come to this Thanksgiving as we have in recent years, with personal doubts and private wonderings, with social problems and troubles that seem almost too much at times. And yet, brothers and sisters, we have life, a faith and a conscience. We have a faith to sustain us, as well as a faith in others and in better tomorrows. We have a conscience that can identify and face and eventually redress some of the grossest wrongs of which man is capable.

We know right from wrong. We know war from peace. We have found ways to outlaw some means of waging war. We may yet find ways to outlaw war itself. We have not lost our sense of human dignity or our love of truth or our believe in justice.

Let me continue. We have, though we too often forget, the fundamental strength of this land - its millions of acres - its many farms and forests, its mountains and its plains. There is something enduring in land, some counterforce to equalize the teeming restlessness of our cities. I think we are a people who know deep down that there is a continuity, a root cause, a source of strength and belief, in ourselves, in our land, in others and ultimately in a power greater than ourselves whom we call God. For these things let us be thankful today. Let us give thanks for what we have, for what we are, for what we may yet become. As someone said recently, "The problems never looked tougher, but the prospects have never been brighter."

PERSONAL CRISIS

Or consider your personal "here and now". Yours may be a lonely and difficult road. Yet this could be your finest hour. In your "here and now", there may be the greatest opportunity you have ever had to know of God's presence and to feel the resources of faith that can come into a life only at a time of extremity. Through "blood, sweat and tears", Churchill led his nation and millions of lives were changed.

Through the experience of God in the life and spirit of Christ, people have been changed in the midst of personal crises. What a difference it makes to know that God is with us. Not back there in the far-off past, not in the future alone, but "here and now" - close at hand, nearer than hands and feet. "This is the day which the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it".

GOD IS FAITHFUL

And so next Thursday we celebrate our national day of Thanksgiving. There are two sources for this holiday. One is Governor Bradford in 1621, and the other is President Lincoln in 1863. Both men lived with the Old Testament. You can tell that in their prose. Both men spoke with the cadence of Hebrew Scripture. Both men called for days of thanksgiving in a time of deprivation and hardship. One after the bitter winter of 1620, and the other in the midst of the bitterest war that we have ever known.

So both men shared the vision of the 126th Psalm, written also in a time of suffering and deprivation. The Psalm begins thanking God for His providence in the past, "When the Lord did great things and we were glad". And

it ends with the expectation of His grace once again in the future when,
"Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy".

The underlying assumption of both our national holiday and of Biblical thanksgiving is that God is faithful. So Bradford believed, because God is faithful, even in the midst of this deprivation we can keep working to forge a nation out of a wilderness. And Lincoln knew even in the midst of Civil War, if we keep working we can build a new nation out of the ruins, because God is faithful.

We don't know how He will act, or through what means, or when. But He will act, so we keep trying. He gives the growth, not us. So do something. Then be prepared. Watch. For maybe what is sown in tears, this year will be reaped in joy.

CLOSING In his diary, Dag Hammorskjold wrote:

"God does not die on the day that we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by a steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason".

Thanksgiving, to me, celebrates that mystery beyond all reason. We plant, somewhere waters, but God gives the growth. God doesn't die when we cease to believe that. What dies is something in us. We have much to be thankful for "in the here and now", but most of all we can be thankful for God's presence in our lives and in our time. Amen.

PRAYER Give us thankful hearts, O God, now and ever more. Bless, direct and keep us and grant us this grace of gratitude. Amen

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THANKSGIVING SUNDAY

November 19, 1972

PARK AVENUE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

New York, New York

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How tragic, how sad it is always to be caught on this treadmill, preparing for the next phase of life and never having the time or serenity to sit back and enjoy the present. ~~We need to remember that our lives at home or in the office or wherever we may be at this time are not entirely a preparation for something in the future, but a vital part of life's "here and now"~~. The psalmist of Israel put it this way long ago: "This is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it". Let us then be thankful for this day, for this time, for this moment. This is the holy ground!

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CONCLUSION

It was on the 3rd of October in 1863, the war between the North and the South raged on, and Abraham Lincoln was born weary with his anguishing responsibilities. And yet he could write to the people:

"The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added".

With this introduction, acknowledging "the ever watchful providence of Almighty God", Lincoln crystallized as a national custom the observance of the fourth Thursday of November as our day of national thanks-giving. Today, in an age of too much fashionable despair and defeat, the world needs more than ever to hear America's perennial harvest message:

"Take heart! Give thanks! To see clearly about us is to rejoice; and to rejoice is to worship God; and to worship Him is to receive more blessings still".

PRAYER: Give us thankful hearts, O God, now and ever more. Bless, direct and keep us and grant us this grace of gratitude. Amen