

November 22, 2020

Thanksgiving 2020

What Are You Looking At?

Habakkuk 3:17-19

Did you know that Thanksgiving did not become a national holiday until 1941? However, Americans have been observing a day of thanksgiving for generations. Historians tell us the first recorded thanksgiving took place in Jamestown, Virginia. The winter of 1610 was harsh at Jamestown and many settlers died. The group that once totaled 409 had been reduced to 60. History tells us the survivors prayed for help, without knowing when or how it might come. When help arrived, it was in the form of a ship filled with food and supplies from England, a prayer meeting was held to give thanks to God.

George Washington declared a Thanksgiving Day in 1783, because the Revolution was over. Years later, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November 1863, as "a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father." Each year afterward, for 75 years, the President formally proclaimed the last Thursday in November a Thanksgiving Day. But in 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt set it one week earlier. He wanted to help the struggling economy by lengthening the shopping season. In 1941, Congress declared the fourth Thursday of November a national holiday, Thanksgiving! Our scripture reading for today comes from the Old Testament, Habakkuk 3:17-19. Let me call this message *What Are You Looking At?*

**Habakkuk 3:17-19**      Though the fig tree does not bud  
and there are no grapes on the vines,  
though the olive crop fails  
and the fields produce no food,  
though there are no sheep in the pen  
and no cattle in the stalls,  
<sup>18</sup> yet I will rejoice in the LORD,  
I will be joyful in God my Savior.  
<sup>19</sup> The Sovereign LORD is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
he enables me to tread on the heights.

The Thanksgiving we know happened in 1621. Do you remember the story? The Pilgrims left Southampton, England in 1620. They wanted religious freedom. There was trouble from the start. As they sailed around the south tip of the British Isles one of the ships, the *Speedway*, was ruled not seaworthy. The two ships docked and some of the Pilgrims went home. However, some of the *Speedway's* passengers boarded the second ship, the *Mayflower*. Due to the extra weight, the trip took longer than the estimated 66 days. They had navigation problems too. They wanted to go to Virginia, but they

arrived in New England in December. Like today, the weather was harsh. There was no time to build permanent shelters, so they survived that first winter in the new world in crude temporary housing. In time, disease came, and the death toll began to rise. Only 51 of the original 102 saw the spring. The dead were buried in unmarked graves so the local natives would not know how small their numbers had grown. When the spring came, they were forced to make a painful choice. The Mayflower was a rented ship and had to return to England. Would they stay in America or return to England? They decided to stay, and their luck began to change. Friendly Native Americans helped them plant 30 acres of wheat and build permanent shelters. By autumn of 1621 their homes were built, and their crops were harvested. They decided to observe a day of thanksgiving to thank God for his blessings. This time, there was a meal, and they invited their new friends.

Does that story sound familiar? It should because I tell it to you annually. It is easy to imagine. However, this time do not imagine it like a Norman Rockwell painting, where everyone is happy and content. Think about the story historically. Thanksgiving was not born out of contentment. Thanksgiving was born out of hardship. Half of the original Pilgrims had died. That means everyone family lost a loved one. That means everybody knew someone who had died. I read this week that the Pilgrims dug seven times more graves than they built shelters. The Pilgrims were grieving. However, they decided to look at what they had, not what they had lost or wanted. History tells us the Pilgrims did not go to the cemetery and curse God. History tells us they went to church and thanked God for what they had. The Pilgrims were thankful to be alive. So, let me ask you the question again. What are you looking at? With that in mind let us look at our Old Testament lesson.

Many years ago, before man walked on the moon, before a civil war threatened to divide America, or before Columbus discovered a New World, there was a man who spoke for God. His name meant "Embrace," but we just call him Habakkuk. He lived in the year 605 BC. He was well rooted in the traditions of Israel, so many have concluded he lived in Jerusalem. His book does not contain any proclamation to Israel. His book, only three chapters long, is a dialogue between himself and God. Habakkuk is complaining to the Almighty because the lives of the Chosen People are hard, and it is only going to get worse. Babylon will soon be their conquerors.

In our reading for today, Habakkuk 3:17-19, the prophet is praying to God. Once again, he is complaining to the Almighty. He is tired of the hardship. Then, in the middle of his prayer the tone changes. Habakkuk has learned the lesson of faith – trust God regardless of the circumstance. He says, even if things get worse, he will rejoice in God his Savior. (verse 18) It is not an easy lesson to learn. Can the same things be said about us? Are we willing to trust God regardless of the situation? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**"

Let us be completely honest 2020 has been a hard year. The pandemic has changed everything. To date, according to world meter, nearly 59 million have gotten the coronavirus and over 1.3 million have died. I am happy to report, I am one of the over 40 million who have survived. COVID-19 has made everything difficult. The last time we gathered as a church inside was March 8. We did not return as a church until last week, November 15. That is 252 days later. On March 8, we welcomed 213 worshippers. Last week, we welcomed 30 indoor worshippers, plus parking lot and virtual worshippers. At first, we hoped to be inside by Easter. Some hoped, we would be inside by Pentecost. The Fourth of July, without a picnic, came and went, and we did not return inside. Labor Day came and went, without a fair, and we did not return inside. We observed the dark holiday, Halloween, but we did not return inside. We passed out more candy than ever. We held a national election election in a new way. Now it is time for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and we are going to celebrate them in a new way. Some fear the old ways may never return.

I should not complain it has been hard on everyone. The simplest things have become difficult. It is a hard time to celebrate a birthday. Drive by and honking is not the same. It is a hard time to have surgery. There is so much more pre-testing because of the virus. It is a hard time to have a baby. Your family can not even come to the hospital and celebrate new life. It is a hard time to die. Very few are permitted to gather to remember lives that were well live. It is a hard time to get married. I have a patient bride in my family. For years, she dreamed of their big day. Now they are forced to decide if they want to wait longer or go with a smaller crowd. You know it is true. Everything is difficult. We were told recently, all family dinners in Ohio should be canceled. If you will admit life is hard say, "**Amen!**" However, life has always been hard.

One of the great names in American history is Helen Keller (1880-1968). She was born both deaf and blind. Yet, with help of her teacher, Anne Sullivan (1866-1936), she became to first deaf-blind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. You may know the story from the movie, *The Miracle Worker*. Various adaptions have come out through the years. She earned that degree from Radcliffe. She went on to become an author, political activist, and lecturer. Helen Keller once said, "*So much has been given to me I have no time to ponder what has been denied.*" Think about it for a moment. Born deaf and blind, Keller chose to ignore the hardship and only see her blessings. It is not just the story of Helen Keller. It is our story as well.

Each one of us on Thanksgiving must choose. Are you going to look at what you want or are you going to look at what you have? It is easy to see what we want. We find those things in our disappointments. We are disappointed we cannot travel to be with family and friends. We are disappointed family and friends cannot travel to be with us. We are disappointed the big Thanksgiving crowd has been whittled down to a few. We are disappointed we are stuck at home. It is not so easy to see what we have.

Learn from the Pilgrims. Be thankful for the basics. However, I must say this, everyone I know has a good life still. Are you thankful for the home in which you live? It is getting cold outside. Are you thankful for your car? Everything is a long walk. Are you thankful for your family pet? They love you unconditionally 365 days a year. Are you thankful for the food you eat? No one has starved in the congregation lately. Are you thankful for your good health? I am. Are you thankful for the people who love you and have sacrificed for you? Are you thankful for the people who pray for you? We are a blessed people and God has been faithful to us. It all comes down to a simple choice. Are you going to see what we want or are you going to see what you have? The Pilgrims choose to see what they had. They had survived. Habakkuk, in the end, decided to see what he had. He had God and God is always good. God has been good to us. So, let me ask you one more time. What are you looking at? Are you looking at what you want? Are you looking at what you have?

What is your first Thanksgiving memory? My first memory is when I was about five years old. My family, the five of us, traveled to Cleveland and spent the day with my father's Aunt Nelma, and her lifelong companion, Ruth. Years later, I wondered about their relationship, but those were more innocent times. It does not really matter. They lived in a small apartment near Shaker Heights. I can still see their apartment in my mind's eye. The living room was small. The bedroom with twin beds was small, and the kitchen was tiny. When it was time to eat, the seven of us sat around a small table in a smaller alcove. I am confident we ate turkey with all the extras. Once consumed, we were dismissed to the living room, so the dishes could be washed. We sat and talked for a while, then my father announced we were going for a ride to look at Christmas lights. I do not know how it happened because we had such a small car, but the seven of us got in. We drove around the city and looked for decorations. We drove down East Ninth Street. We drove around Public Square and I studied the Soldiers and Sailor Memorial. I remember my dad drove by NELA Park, The National Electric Lamp Association. It was owned by GE, so their lights were bright. I was excited when dad drove by old Cleveland Municipal Stadium, the home of the Browns and Indians. I strained to see Chief Wahoo hanging on the outside. Then, we stopped driving and walked around Shaker Square. We looked in the store windows. We walked by a restaurant and my mother told me that is where the rich people eat. When we returned to the apartment, pie was served. Then, my aunt and uncle came for a quick visit. That is where my memory ends. It was a great day!

I think about Thanksgiving annually. It is one of my favorite childhood memories. Through the years, I have many great Thanksgivings. I have hosted a few at my house. But, that Thanksgiving in Cleveland holds a special place in my heart. It was not special because the food was outstanding. It was not special because I did not have responsibility. It was not special because I received a surprise Thanksgiving gift. It was special because I was living in the moment, without any expectations. Can I give you some pastoral advice? Forget your disappointments and frustrations on Thanksgiving. Live in the moment. Never forget it. You have a great life because God loves you. Look

at all God has given you. Do you remember the quote from Helen Keller? She once said. *"So much has been given to me I have no time to ponder what has been denied."* May that be our story as well. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**