

The 20th Sunday after Pentecost
 October 10, 2021
 Proper 23

The Lessons:

Deuteronomy 8:1-10

Psalm 67

1 Timothy 2:1-4

Luke 17:11-19

The Hymns:

892 *Come, Ye Thankful People, Come*

893 *Sing to the Lord of Harvest*

894 *For the Fruits of His Creation*

895 *Now Thank We All Our God*

The Collect:

Almighty God, Your mercies are new every morning and You graciously provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your goodness, give thanks for Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:

Thanksgiving in the Wilderness

Deuteronomy 8:1-10

The Word of the Lord from Deuteronomy 8: "Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

You know, living in the wilderness in a portable tent city for forty years wasn't all that it was cracked up to be.

It's rather strange, in fact, that it would take that long to get from Egypt to the Promised Land. In our present day, Cairo is less than 500 kilometers away from Jerusalem as the crow flies: to take forty years to get there works out to traveling about 33 metres per day.

Furthermore, there were a bunch of bumps on the road: the people ran out of water more than once, which the Lord had to provide miraculously. They ran out of food and complained until the Lord sent manna falling from the sky. This went on for forty years, four decades of time in which the Lord made sure that their clothes didn't wear out and their feet didn't swell. There were fiery serpents and scorpions and barren desert. It just doesn't sound like a pleasant place to be.

It didn't have to be like that. The Lord could have done things differently: this is the same all-powerful God who parted the Red Sea. He could have led them directly to the land of milk and honey. But

instead, He picked the long road. Forty years long. Why? He tells us in our Old Testament lesson for this Thanksgiving celebration.

The Lord says that He did it so “that He might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.” When they ran out of water and food in the wilderness, they were quick to panic and worried that they were going to die of thirst and starvation—in other words, they were quick to doubt the Lord’s mercy. In fact, they were quick to accuse Moses and God of leading them into the wilderness to die.

That sort of distrust can swing more than one way: the Lord warned that, once they reached the Promised Land and had all of its abundance, they’d be likely to forget that it was all a gift from Him. So, in preparation for the Promised Land, He humbled them. He put them in a situation where they said, “We cannot survive out here on our own. We need the Lord to keep us alive.” So He did: and to remind them that He is the One who sustains life from day to day, He provided just enough manna for them to live from day to day. He kept it up, too: the manna didn’t stop falling until they entered the Promised Land.

Thus, they learned from the humbling and the testing that the Lord would provide for them all the things they needed. And perhaps that trust would come easier for sinners in the wilderness than in the Promised Land: it’s easy to turn wealth and abundance into idols that make you think you don’t need God. Poverty and need can have the effect of making you see your need for the Lord’s mercy. Thus, the Israelites were humbled and tested, so that they might believe that “man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

There was more to it, too: it was a matter of discipline. He declares, “Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you.” Some of the discipline in the wilderness was punishment: there’s no hiding the fact that they were in the wilderness for forty years because the generation of adults that came out of Egypt refused to believe that God would give them the Promised Land, but instead made fear a god and believed that they’d be slaughtered by those “giants” in Canaan. Because they doubted God and were afraid to enter the land He gave, the Lord declared that none of the Israelites would enter until that generation died off. That was the reason for the forty-year delay.

But not all of it was punishment. Discipline also means training: and once again, the Lord was training His people to trust in Him. As He provided food and deliverance from danger in the wilderness, so He would give them victory over the inhabitants of the Promised Land. He promised that it was so: thus, once again, He was training them to know that they were to live “by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” -- By every promise that He spoke.

One more thing about those forty years: they had a starting point. The Israelites weren’t always in the wilderness. They’d spent 400 years in Egypt as slaves. They would have died there as slaves, too: but the Lord rescued them from that slavery—rescued them wondrously, miraculously and dramatically. The wilderness might not be the greatest place to be, but it was a far better situation than slavery and death. That’s especially true since it wasn’t their destination. The wilderness was just the time between the slavery and the Promised Land. Throughout those years, the Lord would humble them,

test them and discipline them. He would also provide for them, protect them and give them the Promised Land full of every good thing.

It's no coincidence that Jesus went into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. As Israel was baptized through the Red Sea into the wilderness for forty years, so Jesus was baptized and went straight to His temptation for forty days. He did perfectly what the people of Israel utterly failed to do. Where the people sinned against God again and again, Jesus remained perfectly sinless and obedient. Where they needed to be humbled, He was perfectly humble. Where Israel panicked because there was momentarily no food, Jesus fasted and trusted. In fact, when the devil tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread, Jesus quoted this Old Testament lesson: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Always humble, He met every test and remained the disciplined Son.

Why did He do so? He wasn't just re-enacting wilderness life to see what it must have been like for His ancestors. He did this to redeem them—and to redeem you, too. He lived that perfect life in order to credit you with His perfect obedience. Then He went to the cross; and on the cross, His Father punished Him with the judgment for the sin of the world—yours included. He was crucified for our sins, then raised up again on the third day. That is why He came. That's what He came to do.

All of this frames your life on earth; and, actually, it frames your Thanksgiving Day tomorrow. I do pray that it is a day of celebration and comfort, of family and friends—a time as enjoyable and care-free as a Norman Rockwell painting. It may not be, though; you may have all sorts of things tugging at the corners of your mind or elbowing their way front and center. There's a reason for this: you, too, are celebrating Thanksgiving in the wilderness. You're not in the Promised Land—not yet! You're still in the land of fiery serpents and scorpions, of thirst and hunger—or arthritis and cancer, bad decisions and troubled relationships. That's what the wilderness is like, and the troubles you face will be used by the devil to leave you thankless and doubting God. But you have so much to be thankful for.

There's the obvious stuff for thanksgiving—the daily bread that the Lord provides for you in this world. As the Small Catechism puts it, the Lord has given you clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, family, fields, cattle and all your goods. It is easy to take for granted, but the poorest in our nation still have more than much of the rest of the world. It is very easy to forget that the Lord provides and sustains from day to day. George Washington wrote in 1789, "It is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor." You have much because the Lord gives it to you and because the Lord sustains it from day to day. For this, you should truly give thanks—not just once a year, but daily and likely far more than you do.

That's true, and pretty typical Thanksgiving sermon stuff; but there's more to be thankful for. The Lord also gives you those other strange gifts that He gave Israel in the wilderness: namely, the humbling, the testing and the discipline. Life in this wilderness is a rocky road. You will hurt, you will lack, you will sin, you'll stumble and fall and fail. And you'll wonder why the Lord chooses to do things this way. The best answer we can give from Scripture is that you're His children. The setbacks and troubles you face are consequences of being a sinner in a sinful world, but their effects on you are not random slaps of a heartless cosmos. The Lord has made you His children—His sons and daughters, He says, in order to assure you that you are His heirs. As you make your way through this wilderness,

remember that you're in the wilderness, and that's already a step up: once you were enslaved in sin, dead and headed for hell. But the Lord brought you out of your "Egypt" through the Red Sea of Holy Baptism, all for the sake of Christ who died for you. For those apart from Christ, this world is the beginning of hell. But you've already been rescued, redeemed by the blood of Christ: this wilderness is transit to the Promised Land of heaven.

So the Lord, who has made you His children, disciplines you as a father disciplines his sons. That's not an enjoyable thing: the book of Hebrews tells us, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11). In fact, Hebrews also tells us, in the mystery of the Incarnation, that "Although [Jesus] was a son, He learned obedience through what He suffered" (Hebrews 5:8). So it is for you. When you fail or stumble, the Lord uses that to humble you so that you might instead boast of His mercy. When you lack—be it food or peace or health, He uses that for good, to discipline you to cast your cares upon Him and trust in Him. He tests you, because sinners like you and me need constant testing, constant redirection back to repentance and trust in Him.

The Lord is treating you like beloved children. If He did not, you would be God-forsaken, left to yourself—perhaps with a nice life, but with no hope. Troubles in your life would not be used for a father's discipline, but only as punishment for your sin. So where you are so humbled, disciplined, and tested, God will use these things also for your good. Where you have been tested, you can be God's instrument and a strong advocate for those who are tested like you. Where the affliction overwhelms you as something greater than you can bear, know that Christ has borne it for you. If such things continue to point you back to Christ and guard against falling in love with the wilderness, then that focus back on the cross is a blessing indeed and something to give thanks for.

And always remember this: you're in the wilderness. The Lord has led you out of the slavery of sin and death this far, and you have a destination. The Promised Land of heaven is yours, where you have the certain hope of eternal life free from all sin and struggle, where God will wipe every tear from your eyes.

St. Paul puts this into practice in 2 Corinthians 12. He writes that he was given a thorn in the flesh to keep from becoming conceited. He writes, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). In your weakness, the Lord demonstrates His strength and deliverance, and His strength and deliverance are indeed things to be thankful for.

A blessed Thanksgiving to you all; and rejoice, my friends. The Lord is treating you as His beloved children, because you are His beloved children. He gives you all that you need for this body and life. He gives all that you need for this body and soul for eternal life.

O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; and His mercy endures forever. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.