

“Christ Brings Hope”
(Deuteronomy 8:1-10)
Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. For the national day of thanksgiving our assigned Old Testament reading is from Deuteronomy. This is a reading that requires some explanation as we try to relate to it. It isn't easy, but it is most definitely worth the effort. Moses is speaking to God's people as they have completed their 40 year wilderness wanderings and they are about to enter the Promised Land. It's true that they have much to be thankful for having finally come to the fruition of God's great promise to them leading them into a land in which they will “lack nothing (Dt 8:9).” Talk about a blessing: being led to a place where your *every* need is met! Perhaps such a conviction about a blessed place is not far removed from *what* the first colonists thought about America as they realized the abundance of this land. In a short time, it wasn't difficult for many of the Christians who came here to describe America as the new Jerusalem. We aren't quite so idealistic, but even in the face of so many cultural maladies, it is still easy to count the many blessings the Lord has permitted us in our land. Indeed we have much to be thankful for!

But in order to engage in proper thanksgiving, not only did the Lord point His people in Deuteronomy to look forward, but just as importantly – if not more so – the Lord led them to look back. And this is where the word of explanation becomes necessary in trying to relate to the words of Moses from this last book in the Pentateuch: the proper comparison is not at all in treating our new Jerusalem as the United States of America, but the proper comparison is to treat our Promised Land, our new Jerusalem as our promise of heavenly glory. To begin to relate to these words therefore we need to ask ourselves about where our wilderness wanderings come in. Answer: we're in them right now. And this is where Deuteronomy, especially becomes helpful to us today. The Lord is recounting reasons to be thankful in Deuteronomy. We are called to be thankful not only for the glory that is to come when we shall lack nothing, but we are called to “look back” but for us the “looking back” is to look at our lives *now*.

From the perspective of the Israelites their “now” (at the time) included the following:

- 1) They were humbled as they were tested (verse 2).
- 2) They were permitted to hunger as they were taught that they did not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (verse 3).
- 3) They were provided for and in an amazing way their provision did not wear out (verse 4).
- 4) They were disciplined (verse 5).

Now I don't know about you, but if I took the time

this Thanksgiving to actually count my blessings, I'm not exactly naturally inclined to list those things in my life which have caused humiliation, painful testing, times of hunger (in its various forms), including times of apprehension about things running out or wearing out, and of course, times of being disciplined. These aren't the things that I consider – at least at first glance – of those things worthy of thanks. Discipline for example can come upon us in the most unpleasant ways. What some have called “the dark night of the soul” or what Scripture calls “the day of evil,” times when we are tested in ways that we suspect we're about to die, when we wonder if this is what a nervous break-down feels like, when we believe that we're experiencing the actual definition of despair and/or depression; when life tastes bitter and when the soul becomes familiar with fear. When these times come, we are tested. In some of these moments, Moses himself was willing for the Lord to take his life.

C.F.W. Walther, the first president of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, an amazing theologian, an astounding pastor once wrote these words about his time of discipline: “I may and must now reveal to you that the last half of the previous year has been one of the most difficult times of my life. I was physically incapable of attending to even half the office that I am dignified to carry out among you in unworthy fashion. Even more, the prospect that I would again be capable of the same became gloomier and darker month by month. I owe it to you to be transparent. I was tormented night and day by the thought that through my fault in many different ways, our congregation would withdraw with quick strides from the path of the first love and simplicity. And more than that, my own relationship with my God and Lord filled me with deep aversion and vexation. God placed before me, as never before, my entire past. He let me see my misery as I had never seen it before. I was filled with misery and distress. It appeared to me as though God had cast me away from His countenance. It seemed as though He regarded me as a rejected instrument, as if I were not a worker but a stumbling stone in His vineyard, which He must finally cast aside. It appeared to me as though God desired to take away all the blessings that He had thus far brought about through my witness to His truth, and this through a horrid end of my effectiveness. My only hope was a blessed death.” (Matthew C. Harrison, *At Home in the House of My Fathers*, Lutheran Legacy: 2009. 143)

But Walther went on: “But what happened? When the distress had reached its greatest intensity, help came.” (Ibid, 143) It's sometimes hard for us to admit, but we can't really be thankful nor can we properly handle the blessings we're permitted to enjoy without having been properly forged through testing. This was why the Lord reviewed the hard times with His people, because they were about to receive rich blessings (because without humility all is lost). Luther taught: “the occasion which prosperity and abundance provide for transgressing the First Commandment. They turn the heart away much more strongly than adversity and want do, as he says in his song (Deut. 32:15): ‘Having become swollen, fat, and thick, he rebelled’; and (Prov. 1:32): ‘The prosperity of the foolish destroys them’; as is said also in the German proverb: ‘You need strong legs to hold up under good days.’ For man endures evil more easily

than good, as the poet says, 'Luxury has invaded as a deadlier foe.'" (Luther's Works, American Edition Volume 9: 92)

So we learn our lessons here: be thankful for the hard times (of course we need the Holy Spirit to enable us to do so). And these hard times humble you and they provide occasion to learn the most important lesson: you don't stand on your own! You need the Lord. Furthermore, the Lord reaches out to help us through His Word. Hear the Word of the Lord from Deuteronomy 8:3: "that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

If I stopped here, however, I would only leave you with Law, giving you the burden of trying to generate enough humility to put your suffering in perspective. Not good enough. Not even close. We need the Gospel.

When Israel was rebellious and when they did not respond in humility; when Israel forgot about the Lord and refused to be disciplined, the Lord remained gracious; when Moses wanted to die, the Lord restored his spirit; when Walther felt hopeless, the Lord sent help. When in our inner being we don't feel thanksgiving due to our doubt, the Lord reveals to us the basis for our thanksgiving: He reminds us that to live is Christ. How did and how does the Lord do this? Answer: He is always sending His Word. Clement of Alexandria: "One who possesses the Word [Jesus Christ], who is almighty God, needs nothing and never lacks any of the things he desires, for the Word is an infinite possession and the source of all our wealth." (Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture, Old Testament III, InterVarsity Press, 2001. 287)

Don't let this become an ethereal, weird idea. I remember on one occasion driving from The Woodlands, TX into Houston, TX (about a 30-40 mile drive) to see my father-confessor at the time (the Rev. Dr. Scott Murray). I was going in to practice our old Lutheran practice of private confession and absolution. I had a lot on my shoulders and I was downtrodden. I confessed to God and to my confessor. He counseled me and then he gave me what was most important, the Lord's holy absolution. I remember driving away with tears in my eyes so relieved, so uplifted, so helped: the Lord was still with me in spite of what I had been feeling.

We are messengers of this truth all of the time. What are we really thankful for? Try the unconditional love of our family members who know the Lord. For Christian mothers and fathers who love their children no matter what. For Christian children who help their parents no matter what. For people who will forgive us when we have hurt them; for those who remind us of God's love.

The true purpose of our testing and hunger is not to make us stronger in order to help ourselves, but to convince us that we are so weak that we could never help ourselves and that in spite of our great weakness, the Lord is gracious to us! And Jesus your help is *gladly* your help. For you, He entered all testing, all hunger, and all suffering and then He conquered them for you.

And this leads us to our first Advent theme as we anticipate Advent's beginning this coming Sunday: we cannot look to the future of all that we have to be thankful for in eternal glory, unless we understand what we go through today; and why we go through it: we are humbled to hunger for Christ. And this dear Christian requires hope (also God's gift to you). Real thanksgiving – in this hard life – cannot happen without hope. "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?" (Romans 8:24) This hope is a sure hope and to know it so well means that the basis and object of this hope is already present even in this world. Our hope is the Word...that which comes from the mouth of God is Christ...when He spoke at the creation, it was the Word made flesh who created the heavens and the earth; and when He spoke at your baptism, it was the Word made flesh who caused you to be created anew; and He takes you when you feel like dying and makes you alive through faith; through faith created and sustained and nourished through His Word and His Sacrament.

But why? What's the point? The point is to make us thankful that God is with us; so thankful that we share His joy, and become as little Christs to serve our neighbor especially in our witness to the Gospel. You are made to be a thanksgiving people so that you would no longer live for yourselves, but for Him who died for you and conquered death for you so that your hope is real. So let's conduct ourselves as thanksgiving people with real hope: living for others; sharing the saving Gospel; serving your neighbor in need; serving those who also go through those difficult times and wonder why they should be thankful. Shine your light upon them Christian; the Word has made you new. Share your hope Christian; the Word has given you life; share your hope Christian; Christ is your life. There is no better way to celebrate thanksgiving! For "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1st Peter 2:9) And this light is amazing because just as the Lord caused the garments of the Israelites to last without wearing out; He has given you a faith to last and not wear out and if the Lord can do that – and He is doing that dear Christian – then "God can extend the quality of incorruption in certain bodies for as long as he wills." (Ibid., 288) Those "certain bodies" are *your* bodies; you who eat and drink the body and blood of Him who is leading you to the time when you will lack nothing. But be thankful now, because it is in the wilderness now that we learn that Christ is already with us! In this certain hope, we are thankful!