

Going Home

Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz

Date: November 20, 2016

13:34

"Going Home" Pilgrim Church UCC, November 20, 2016, Thirty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time/Thanksgiving Sunday (Jeremiah 23:1-6)

On Thursday many Americans will observe Thanksgiving and it's important to remember why we do what we do on this national holiday. On the Plimoth Plantation website, we can find helpful information about the origins of Thanksgiving. For starters, this celebration was never just about the Pilgrims and their traditions. It was already tradition for many Native People of North America to give thanks to the Creator for good harvests long before any white folks showed up on these shores. Ceremonies took place to ask for the Creator's blessing for a good growing season in early spring and to celebrate the good fortune of a child being born. In England and throughout Europe, similar celebrations occurred after a successful harvest. So these different groups of people had something in common—they gave thanks to God for the good yield of the earth.

In 1621 specifically, the Pilgrims had a bountiful harvest after a year of sickness and scarcity so they gave thanks to God and celebrated the bounty in the Harvest Home tradition with feasting and playing sports. (Maybe football on our modern Thanksgiving isn't so crazy after all!) For these devout Christians, this moment was an expression of gratitude to God. There aren't many primary sources that detail the events of that Thanksgiving—though one of the sources claims that after the harvest had been taken in the governor sent men to hunt and they had a successful hunt of various fowls. Many Native Americans came among them (including their greatest king Massasoit and ninety Native men) who the Pilgrims entertained and feasted with for three days. The Native Americans even went out and killed five deer and brought them back to Plimoth Plantation as a gift to the governor for his hospitality.

Things didn't stay peaceful among the Pilgrims and various tribes of Native Americans to say the least. There were terrible massacres at later points. Protests still happen in Plymouth on Thanksgiving because of the history of colonialism. Though from my research, it seems that the story of that Thanksgiving in 1621 really was a peaceful moment of people who were different and yet had some shared rituals around gratitude coming together to give thanks.

At any rate, the good folks at Plimoth Plantation say that our national Thanksgiving celebration is a combination of the Native and New England customs of rejoicing after a good harvest and the specifically Puritan Thanksgiving which was unsurprisingly more solemn and combined prayer and feasting. Here's what's funny though—Florida, Texas, Maine, and Virginia all declare themselves the site of the first Thanksgiving. Before we get all offended that these claims are ludicrous, we should know that there are historical documents to support some of these claims! Spanish explorers and English colonists celebrated various religious services of Thanksgiving years before the Mayflower arrived in Massachusetts.

After years of various local traditions (including that famous Thanksgiving in 1621 in Plymouth), the Continental Congress proclaimed the first national Thanksgiving in 1777 though it was to be a solemn occasion. By the 1850s almost every state and territory celebrated Thanksgiving and it got a whole lot more fun. That's the more or less official story. As Plimoth's website rightly states, "If there is one day each year when food and family take center stage, it is Thanksgiving. It is a holiday about 'going home' with all the emotional content those two words imply. The Sunday following Thanksgiving is always the busiest travel day of the year in the United States . . . Despite modern-age turmoil—and perhaps, even more so, because of it—

gathering together in grateful appreciation for a Thanksgiving celebration with friends and family is a deeply meaningful and comforting annual ritual to most Americans.”[1]

For many people, Thanksgiving is a time of going home. Sometimes that’s fantastic even if stressful travel is required. Other times, going home feels hard or it just can’t happen for various reasons. I’ve been hearing from friends who have family members who may have voted differently (and feel just as passionately about where they stood) and it’s leading to a whole lot of anxiety about conversations that may take place at the Thanksgiving table this year. These aren’t stress-free times we’re in right now even within our own families! And our scripture story has something to say about going home and the complications that may arise.

This week we encounter the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is one of the longest books in the Bible surpassed only by the book of Psalms. Just like we may have forgotten some stuff about Thanksgiving, we may not know much about Jeremiah. He was known as “the weeping prophet” — famous for ten chapters of lamenting. But before we paint Jeremiah as a cry baby, we should know that he was writing to his people who were exiled in Babylon. During his lifetime, Jeremiah witnessed the fall of the Kingdom of Judah, the sacking of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and then the forced exile to Babylon in 587. Though some Jews were able to eventually flee to Egypt (including Jeremiah himself.)

To say that he lived in a tumultuous time is an understatement. Once his people’s entire world literally came crashing down, Jeremiah did his best to help people rebuild their lives. Jeremiah was the weeping prophet, often tearfully asking God, “why?” and “where are you?” Jeremiah got into trouble because he felt that it was better to submit to the empire than to be destroyed by the empire. He had this vision that Jerusalem and the people themselves would be restored by God in the end. But this wasn’t a popular view; Jeremiah had a lot of enemies among his own people. He lamented to God not just about the Babylonians but about his own people who began to persecute him. It is not easy being a prophet! Eventually Jeremiah moved from lamenting to hope and trust that God is still with them. No matter what, God is still with them.

And that’s some of what we hear this morning, God reminding God’s people (through Jeremiah) “Then I myself will gather the remnants of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.”[2]

The people were needing some hope over here, and Jeremiah reminded them that even though times are tough, God is still with us and one day we will get back home. God is the ultimate shepherd and God will raise up new rulers for the people. For later Jews of the Jesus Movement, Jesus of course became the Good Shepherd. Jesus became the “righteous branch” who would execute justice. “Righteous branch” was a messianic title because some folks were really longing for a Messiah after their whole world literally came crashing down. Jeremiah reminded everyone that we need not fear or be dismayed, God will take care of us even if life is terribly difficult right now. In some ways, Jeremiah was reminding everyone that God is the God of the Exodus. And guess what? There’s no homecoming without exile. Exile is the primary theme of Jeremiah. But exile is not the last word of God or the last word for God’s people. We will get home.

There’s a timelessness to this message. Think of the Pilgrims having a terrible time just surviving the harsh New England winter. They must have felt like they were wandering in the wilderness and God wasn’t doing a whole lot to take care of them in this new world. Then a bountiful harvest comes, a celebration takes place, neighbors join the feasting, and the whole time they were thanking God. We cannot paint relations among the Pilgrims and Puritans and the Native Americans as always great. History doesn’t show us a rosy-colored view if we look

past this particular moment in time. However, that Thanksgiving in 1621 seems to have been peaceful. Perhaps that is why it became more famous than the Thanksgiving celebrations in Florida, Texas, Maine, and Virginia that may have happened first. Because it wasn't just one group thanking God for a good harvest—it was people of different cultures and races and backgrounds and beliefs coming together because they had a shared ritual of gratitude.

Sometimes it's hard to be grateful when the world is chaotic. Sometimes it's hard to be grateful when we keep having rough patches in our lives. Sometimes it's hard to be grateful when bad news keeps coming and we can't help but look around and wonder where God is in all of this anyway? To live a life of gratitude is not easy. But at the end of the day, it's worth it. Because gratitude changes our perspectives. Being grateful helps us to be kind and reach out to others, and it even improves our own overall health and well-being. Thanksgiving and going home can bring up all sorts of emotions. Yet despite the hardships and the setbacks and the disappointments, we must remember that God is with us. God is truly with us. And for God's unfailing grace, we can give thanks. Happy Thanksgiving and thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] "Thanksgiving History," Plimoth Plantation, <http://www.plimoth.org/learn/multimedia-reference-library/read-articles-...>

[2] Jeremiah 23:3-4, NRSV.