

WESTMINSTER
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CHURCH



SERMON

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Giving Thanks

Dr. Jo Forrest

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Imagine this: after thirty-nine years, eleven months, and one week of living in the wilderness, finally, the Israelites stand on the edge of the land God promised them back in Egypt.

After all the time wandering, being chastised for bad behavior, having to learn new laws, and existing on a daily diet of manna, they arrive. During the intervening forty years since God broke slavery's chains, had they claimed their freedom?

Today's reading from The Book of Deuteronomy contains Moses' sermon to this next generation of Israelites. Those who escaped through the parted seas have likely died. Their children, now adults, know only wilderness living. They've forgotten the stories of their ancestors and would like to forget these years of struggle.

Moses teaches them freedom by remembering and by doing something unknown – offer their gifts.

Dear God, we admit we too forget your care through the difficult times. In a land of plenty, we presume that what we reap is ours. We grudgingly give what's left over. Put your arm around our shoulders. Turn us to listen to your sacred words. Teach us to live. Teach us gratitude. Amen.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (CEB translation)

Once you have entered the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it and are settled there, take some of the early produce of the fertile ground that you have harvested from the land the Lord your God is giving you, and put it in a basket. Then go to the location the Lord your God selects for his name to reside.

Go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him: “I am declaring right now before the Lord my God that I have indeed arrived in the land the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.”

The priest will then take the basket from you and place it before the Lord your God’s altar. Then you should solemnly state before the Lord your God:

“My father was a starving Aramean. He went down to Egypt, living as an immigrant there with few family members, but that is where he became a great nation, mighty and numerous. The Egyptians treated us terribly, oppressing us and forcing hard labor on us. So we cried out for help to the Lord, our ancestors’ God. The Lord heard our call. God saw our misery,

our trouble, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, and with signs and wonders. God brought us to this place and gave us this land—a land full of milk and honey. So now I am bringing the early produce of the fertile ground that you, Lord, have given me.”

Set the produce before the Lord your God, bowing down before the Lord your God. Then *celebrate* all the good things the Lord your God *has done for you* and your family—each one of you along with the Levites and the immigrants who are among you.

“No one is born thankful” claims Martin Copenhaver, retired pastor and seminary president. As cynical as that sounds, he presses “(t)hankfulness doesn’t come naturally to us, and sometimes it does not come at all.” Copenhaver gleaned his wisdom from loving congregations for decades and then raising ministers to do the same.

Research from the John Templeton Foundation confirms his observations. Less than half of the people surveyed said they

expressed gratitude on a regular basis. Young people, 18 to 24 years old, were the least likely to offer thanks or only express gratitude for self-serving reasons.¹ Yikes.

On *The Simpsons*, when Bart is asked to offer thanks at a family meal, he prays, “Dear God, we bought all of this stuff with our own money, so thanks for nothing.” Bart Simpson’s prayer summarizes the reigning sentiments of our age. Often the more we have, the more likely we are to say, “Thanks for nothing.”

Our American myth of self-reliance creates an obstacle to gratitude. We love the folklore of pioneers who cleared the forest, shaped logs into homes, and settled the land. Since our culture tends to celebrate a desire for fierce independence, to express thanks might diminish that sense of accomplishment. How great are you if you received help?

Gratitude reminds us that we might be indebted or that our destiny is not entirely in our hands.

Another barrier to gratitude is our abundance. A steady-stream of gifts rarely teaches gratitude.

¹ Martin Copenhaver. “Learning to Give Thanks,” *The Christian Century* November 11, 2015. Vol. 132, No. 23, P32.

So, if it feels risky to be grateful, why do so many wise...respected...and accomplished souls live with humility and offer thanks.

Why choose to be grateful?

Clinical studies document gratitude leads to stronger relationships, better sleep, lower blood pressure, fewer depressive symptoms, more patience, even more persistence.²

Wow. Doesn't that sound far more appealing than singly handedly slaying a dragon and ending up exhausted in the process, not to mention being alone?

There's an exception to that research study I mentioned earlier by Templeton. People who attend religious services reported more instances of feeling gratitude than those who do not.

We know gratitude grows in dark and frightening times. Today's reading counters any illusion that we can save ourselves while it lays out the path to joyful living.

² <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/11/14/a-brief-theology-of-thanksgiving>

The writers of Deuteronomy place this teaching in the mouth of Moses, the revered priest who communed with God and led them from slavery. Moses speaks to Israelites who've never stayed in one place long enough to even think of tilling the land.

He teaches them – take the first fruits of the harvest, the early crop, usually the best of the harvest, and recite *their story* of liberation.

Remember at one time, our people starved, and God provided.

Remember, God freed them from enslavement.

Remember, God guided them when they lost their way.

Remember, God provided food each and every day.

Remember. Give thanks to God.

Anyone who ignores the past or fails to learn the lessons from history is likely to repeat past tragedies on a different scale.

There's more. Rabbi Dayna Ruttenberg digs deeper into Deuteronomy as to why the Israelites preserved this set of instructions about gratitude.

Along with other biblical historians and archeologists, she argues the ancient Israelites penned this text long after their wandering ended. Centuries later evidence shows that once again the Israelites languished in an exile from that promised land. They imagined Moses' sermon – to recite God's care for ancestors who faced a similar plight.

The starving Aramean could be either the grand patriarch Abraham or Jacob. Both pillars of faith were driven from their land and with and God's care, found safety. Both were restored to health and wealth. Both learned to trust God.

When the Israelites found themselves oppressed by a foreign ruler all over again, reciting the Exodus story addressed their pain and suffering and put into their bodies a vision of freedom.

Just as their ancestors rebelled against Pharaoh and learned to serve God, while in exile, they will refuse to give themselves to an Assyrian king, they will give the very best of what they create to God.

They imagine a gift of honey, possible only in a land flourishing with blossoms and clover. A gift of milk flows when they

reside in a home where livestock graze in verdant pasture. They dream of a future when they possess the freedom to give.

The scripted liturgy, to be repeated year after year and person after person instills trust in God and God's ways. Rather than let some greedy ruler claim the fruit of their labor, they want to give it to God.

We've given God countless reasons to give up on us – none of them mattered. God remains faithful. God remains generous.

God gave us God's very self in Jesus to teach us.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." We've heard this so many times that we tend to confuse the order. "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also."

It's easy to get confused since our money often follows our passions. We give and spend on what matters to us. That's the appeal we hear from a pet rescue or our alma mater: if you care about this institution, write a check. In other words, "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also."

But Jesus didn't say that.

Jesus teaches a powerful dynamic. Give of your treasure where you want your heart to be, and your heart will catch up. Don't just give to those things you care about. Give to the things you want to care about. We want to love as fiercely as Jesus. So we give to his ministry so love endures in world that feeds hate. We want to see his face in the face of strangers. So we give to the sacred task of becoming brave and protecting those whom others claim are dangerous.

The act of thanking God does not change God, it changes us. Giving the first fruits of what we produce brings us to appreciate that we do not create sustain or redeem ourselves. God alone does.

Until we learn this, withholding our gratitude turns us further away and leads to the same danger of being bound in a system that takes and takes and takes.

Until we learn this gift of giving, God keeps giving.

Stewardship is gratitude in motion. A pledge is a hopeful promise to God. What we pledge is never an obligatory bill to

be paid. Freely giving the best of what we produce says to God and to ourselves: our lives matter and what God is doing in the church matters to the world. We give thanks because we believe the best years for Westminster are ahead. And, together we can make it so.



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