

*Chris McKee, Yale Exchange Student*

*Thanksgiving 2008*

*Westcott Chapel*

“Redeeming The Thanksgiving Season: Living Into the Incarnation as We Remember the Sometimes Painful Past, the Promise of the In-Breaking Future, and the Continual Provision of God’s Care”

***Let the words of my mouth***

***And the mediation of my heart***

***Be acceptable in Thy sight***

***Oh Lord my Strength and My Redeemer.<sup>1</sup>***

***(I greet you in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)***

***Amen.***

My first historical analysis of the Thanksgiving Holiday took place almost 20 years ago while a budding student at the Great Expectations Pre-School in my home state of Ohio.

After much preparation, which involved creating pilgrim black hats, bonnets, and Native American headdresses from an array of

materials that included construction paper, craft store feathers, buckles, and of course magic markers...my classmates and I were ready to do a very “accurate” and historically informed reenactment of the supposed proto-Thanksgiving Feast of Plymouth in 1621.

Some of us dressed as Pilgrims and others as members of the Wampanoag Tribe, all sat together to partake of a lunch of vegetable soup and assorted delicacies.

A time we had.

It would be many years before I would learn of the harvest festival meal that was shared between the English Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Peoples in order to celebrate the surprising survival of the Plymouth Settlement.

That these Pilgrims, a remnant of the Pilgrims that arrived over a year earlier, had survived their first intense, New England winter, due largely to the benevolence of a one time Native American slave named Squanto who assisted the Pilgrims in planting crops, negotiating with local indigenous peoples, and hunting various sorts of game.

In fact, this first Thanksgiving was not the first time Europeans in America decided to thank God for God goodness, and care, and their resulting entry into a Land of Promise...history tells us at least three of these similar harvest festivals took place on the continent of North America, 2 festivals called by the Spanish in Florida in during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and Virginia Company’s Thanksgiving Harvest Feast of 1619.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 19: 14

But it was in the midst of national chaos during the American Civil War, Pres. Lincoln standardized the somewhat haphazard Thanksgiving holiday of the early years of US history in order to offer solemnity, a moment of Thanks, and a sense of national cohesion during a season of Great Trial.

Yes Thanksgiving, although a secular holiday, is an opportunity for Americans to be thankful that have been able to “live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors...”<sup>2</sup>

While remembering “the long way that the LORD has led you these forty years in the Wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what is in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.”<sup>3</sup>

And like Israel after their time of testing and purification, according to the writers of Deuteronomy, the American settlers, seeking religious freedom, economic enterprise, and the opportunity to start a new life...would be able to enter “into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barely, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey...”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 8: 1

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 8: 2

<sup>4</sup> Dtr. 8: 7b-8

I. Yes, America has been a land of *promise* for so many peoples throughout its history, **BUT** for many of her years, America’s status as land of Promise has also made it a land of *pain*, degradation, and alienation for so many of her inhabitants.

For as much as Deuteronomy is a Book that repeats Israel’s experience of blessing and care by God...it is a Book that ensures the conquest and possession of a land, by Israel, that was also inhabited by the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites... It is true, that the Biblical Witness of the hostile take over by Israel of their land of Promise was indeed a bloody one.

This theological notion of deadly conquest coupled with Divine chosenness is difficult to digest, but then we must remember that the authors of Deuteronomy were writing their religio-ethical story more than likely during the time of the Assyrian captivity...thus such language of killing and carnage is troubling, but not so impossible to grasp, as that which was left of the tiny Kingdom of Israel and the developing Diaspora, sought to make sense of their identity, and relationship to Adonai while experiencing such devastation.

The New World would see a convergence of human diversity, from its very infancy...Pluralisms of religions, shades of White, Brown, Black and Red, Peoples from Europe, Africa, Asia, and those indigenous to the Continent would relate to one another as free and slave, dominator and dominated, human and less than human, and for many years Christian (well certain denominations of Christianity) and non-Christian....And, American conquerors would appropriate language of conquest coupled with chosenness akin to that used for

Israel in Scripture...but if one wants to appropriate a story told through the lens of marginality, one must be willing to embody life at the margins...and the power brokers of the American story may have been somewhat secondary players in Europe, but their encounter with the New World would provide them with power and a place at the center; making for a great deal of misappropriation of a particular culture's sacred language.

The History of America, and the history and identity that holidays like Thanksgiving perpetuate are not sanitized and easy stories that make good lessons for kindergarten students using construction paper, magic markers, and craft-store feathers.

It is in the remembrance of the uncomfortable tension between one person's promise and someone else's pain.

For it is the sad realization of humanity's inhumanity toward each other, and the hope of God's place of wisdom, sovereignty, and ultimate goodness...even in those episodes of history that makes us angry, confused, and ponder...mingled in an oft times unbalanced relationship and disconcerting dichotomy.

Which has caused many members of humanity to yearn and anticipate the coming of God's realm of Justice!

HOWEVER, the Good News is that the Christian message is a story of salvaging, restoring, and redeeming, in the name of contradiction.

For

Isn't our belief as an incarnational people, a Divine Contradiction...

Dr. Gardner C. Taylor put it best by saying, "...**that not even God could get to us without getting with us. Indeed this is the Gospel of Immanuel-God with us...**"

Yes it is the divine contradiction of the Eternal embracing temporality...that gives us the Christian hope that promise and pain can result in that which is surely glorious, resurrected and whole!

II. For it is in this location of contradiction that we look for a world that does wrestle solely with **pain** and **promise**, but a world that awaits the **pronouncement** of a new Kingdom breaking into the present and coming to completion in the hope of the eschaton.

A kingdom, of which Jesus teaches in Matthew's Gospel...

A Kingdom not grounded simply in selfish personal security, gain and welfare, and exploitation...in other words "worrying about our lives, what we will eat, or what we will drink...our bodies and what we wear..."<sup>5</sup>

But a Kingdom, in which we consider the lilies of the field who look to God for their care and provision...for surely if God takes care of them and the grasses of the field, which are alive today and tomorrow thrown into the oven...will God not provide for us? Oh we of so little faith!<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 6:25

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6: 30

*Now any thinking Christian must deal with a righteous discontent when such a passive approach to God's care is advocated by a preacher.*

Surely the millions of suffering, cold, naked, neglected, tortured, and victimized persons around the globe are in want of clothing, food, shelter, protection, clean water, farmable land, and a healing touch of love.

And I am sure they wish they felt the immediacy of this rabbinical teaching of Jesus expounding on God's unwavering care.

But I believe it is for those of us who have been blessed with such abundance, that we are to sit at tables of bounty...to share of Thanksgiving feasts.

In acts of faith, worship, gratitude, and radical dependence on a God who can provide manna in the wilderness and sweet honey in our land to reach beyond ourselves...and strive first for the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness...resting in the reality that our needs both temporal and spiritual will be cared for!

For this teaching of Jesus, in the tradition of Deuteronomy, reminds us or re-tells is, it is those who do not know and love God, who seek after or strive after selfish toil without prioritizing their self-less role in embodying the Kingdom of God.

As we give, share, love, live in mutuality...and move from pain and promise...to the Pronouncement of God's Kingdom, of sharing in the beautiful tension of suffering leading to glory, we are then able to begin the process of understanding what it means to be thankful

not just for ourselves...but for our neighbor and fellow citizen of the Kingdom.

We cannot erase the ugliness of history, and I believe it would be a grievous mistake to do so.

But, we can redeem the present through action on behalf of the least of these; by working with as the hands, feet, and mouth of our God, to usher in a day when "all shall be satisfied with the goodness of God's house, God's holy temple."<sup>7</sup>

AMEN.

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 65: 4b