

Read Psalm 145: 1-9 ; “The Pilgrim’s Thanksgiving”, Relating the experience of the Pilgrims at Thanksgiving time in 1621 and 1623. These things were related to the congregation on November 22nd, 2020.

I would like us to think for a few minutes about the 1st Thanksgiving of the Pilgrims and see what they gave thanks to God for.

“In 1620, a boat filled with more than one hundred people sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to settle in the New World. This religious group had begun to question the beliefs of the Church of England and they wanted to separate from it. The Pilgrims settled in what is now the state of Massachusetts. Their first winter in the New World was difficult. They had arrived too late to grow many crops, and without fresh food, half the colony died from disease. The following spring the Iroquois Indians taught them how to grow corn (maize), a new food for the colonists. They showed them other crops to grow in the unfamiliar soil, and how to hunt and fish.”

“In the autumn of 1621, bountiful crops of corn, barley, beans and pumpkins were harvested. The colonists had much to be thankful for, so a feast was planned. They invited the local Indian chief and 90 Indians. The Indians brought deer to roast with the turkeys and other wild game offered by the colonists. The colonists had learned how to cook cranberries and different kinds of corn and squash dishes from the Indians. To this first Thanksgiving, the Indians had even brought popcorn.” “In following years, many of the original colonists celebrated the autumn harvest with a feast of thanks.”

After the United States became an independent country, Congress recommended one yearly day of Thanksgiving for the whole nation to celebrate. George Washington suggested the date November 26 as Thanksgiving Day. Then in 1863, at the end of a long and bloody civil war, Abraham Lincoln asked all Americans to set aside the last Thursday in November as a day of Thanksgiving.” The Pilgrims didn’t have a lot to give thanks for, in comparison to all that we have materially, but they knew the blessings that God had loaded them with:

William Bradford, in Of Plymouth Plantation says:

“They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides, they had about a peck a meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to the proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports.”

Edward Winslow, in Mourt’s Relation:

“Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruits of our labor. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which we brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.

They believed that they were partakers of plenty and they attributed it to the “goodness of God.”

John Stetson Barry in his book – The History of Massachusetts, P. 103 says this:

“In the fall the first Harvest of the colonists was gathered.” “The corn yielded well, and the barley was indifferently good, but the peas were a failure owing to drought and late sowing.” Satisfied, however with the abundance of their fruits, four huntsmen were sent for fowl; and at their return, ‘after a special manner,’ the Pilgrims rejoiced together feasting King Massasoit and ninety men for three days, and partaking of venison, wild turkeys, water fowl, and other delicacies for which New England was then famous.” Thus the time honored festival of Thanksgiving was instituted – a festival which, originally confined in its observance to the sons of the Pilgrims and the State of Massachusetts, has now become almost a National Festival, particularly appropriate as an expression of gratitude to God, and an acknowledgement of dependence upon Him for His bounties, and productive of a treasure of pleasing reminiscences connected with the joys of our childhood, and the mature but more exquisite delights of our own hearth sides, where parents and children, brothers and sisters, and all the loved objects of the family group, renew, at the festive board, the vows of affection, exchange kind greetings, and revive recollections of the past to enliven the present; while the pilgrimage of life is brightened and sweetened by innocent amusements and healthful recreations, and a sense of obligation to the Giver of all good is implanted more deeply in the heart, sanctifying our trials and enhancing our blessings by a consciousness of the presence and protection of God.”

The village of Plymouth contained, at this time, seven dwelling houses, and four other buildings for the use of the plantation, and preparations were making for the erection of more. Literally this was the day of small things, and most of the events thus far recorded appear trifling in comparison with the stirring narratives of the march of armies and the conquest of kingdoms. Yet, trifling as they seem, they are part of our history; and they derive additional interest from the fact that they were the beginnings of a nation whose career during the past hundred years struck with astonishment the nations of the the Old World.”

The situation of the colonists in the spring of 1623 was peculiarly distressing. By the scantiness of the crops and the prodigality of their neighbors, their granaries were exhausted and they were reduced to want. The narrative of their sufferings is affecting and thrilling. By the time their corn was planted, their victuals were spent, and they knew not at night where to their food would come from in the morning; nor had they corn or bread for three or four months together. Elder Brewster lived upon shell fish. With only oysters and clams at his meals, he gave thanks that he could seek of the abundance of the seas, and of treasures hid in the sand. Tradition affirms that at one time there was but a pint of corn let in the settlement, which being divided, gave to each person a proportion of five kernels. In allusion to this incident, at the bi-centennial celebration, in Massachusetts had congregated at Plymouth, and orators had spoken and poets sang the praises of the Pilgrims; amidst the richest viands which had been prepared to gratify the most fastidious epicure to satiety, five kernels of parched corn were placed beside each plate, a simple but interesting and affecting memorial of the distresses of those heroic and pious men who won this fair land of plenty, and freedom and happiness, and yet at times, were literally in want of a morsel of bread.

In April planting commenced, and the weather held favorable until the last of May. Pleased with the new order of things, cheerfulness and industry prevailed. There was a stimulus to exertion in the hope of individual benefit. Even the women and children labored in the field more corn than ever was planted; and more life and zeal were displayed. But though favorable weather forwarded their plants in the earliest of the season, from the third week in May a drought set in; and for six weeks no rain fell, so that the ground was completely parched, and the plants, both blade and stalk hung the head and changed the color, and were judged utterly dead. To add to their distress, they learned of the repulse of a supply, sent by Mr. Pierce, who had now obtained his surreptitious patent (that is, a patent kept secret from the others because it would not have been approved.), and it was feared that the vessel was wrecked on the coast. At once, therefore, God seemed to have

forsaken them. The most resolute faltered, and general despondency prevailed. Even Hobomok was distressed for them. "I fear", said he, "they will lose all their corn, and starve." "The Indians can shift better than the English, for they can get fish."

But true greatness yields not to permanent despair. As God only could aid them, a day was appointed to supplicate His favor. It was fair and beautiful. Not a cloud dimmed the horizon. Nine hours they continued in prayer, wrestling for a blessing. Yet the sun shone brightly, and the air was sultry. But towards evening a change was visible, and before morning the rain came, sweetly and gently, yet freely and copiously. It came without either wind or thunder, and by degrees in the abundance as that the earth was thoroughly wet and soaked therewith, and the withered corn and other plants speedily revived.

This "rain of liberalities" lasted, at intervals, for fourteen days, and caused even the Indians to say, 'Now we see the Englishmen's God is a good God; for He hath heard you, and sent you rain; and that without storms, and tempests, and thunder, which usually we have with our rain, which breaks down our corn; but yours stands whole and good still. Surely your God is a good God. From this time forward the weather continued favorable, and the harvest was fruitful and liberal, in time convenient, they also solemnized a day of thanksgiving unto the Lord.'