

Sermon Draft

Text: Deuteronomy 8:1–10

Sermon: Thanksgiving 2021

Starting with our first parents, Adam and Eve, God has given us a place to live, a place to tend, a place that produces sustenance for our existence, a place that cares for us while we care for it. In Genesis, **“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it”** (Genesis 2:15).

Later, God, through a covenant, gave a land a holy land to his people. To Abraham, he said, **“To your descendants I give this land, from the [river] of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates”** (Genesis 15:18). And of course, later, after Moses had led the Hebrews out of their Egyptian bondage and through forty years of wandering in the desert, **“Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the Lord showed him the whole land. . . . Then the Lord said to him, ‘This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, ‘I will give it to your descendants’”** (Deuteronomy 34:1, 4).

The gift of a land to call our own is God's pattern, right from the beginning. Tomorrow, Thanksgiving Day, exemplifies and highlights this especially for us as Christians but in more ways than that. Thanksgiving is a day to recognize God's pattern of grace always at work among us.

Of course, we, as Christians living in the United States, thank our God for this land where we enjoy the ability to worship God without persecution. A land that produces much good food. A land in which to raise our families and build our homes. A land in which to live out the days of our earthly lives.

And as Lutheran Christians of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, we also remember what it is that brought our Lutheran forebears to America in the mid-1800s.

The Reformation took place in Saxony, Germany, in the sixteenth century, triggered by events surrounding Martin Luther's posting of his Ninety-Five Theses on the castle church door in Wittenberg, October 31, 1517. In fact, many of the events of the Reformation took place in Saxony, which at the time was essentially a kingdom. There was no unified country of Germany as we know it today.

Now, what we know as Saxony today, contemporarily, is the German state of Saxony in the eastern part of the Federal Republic of Germany. But there are also two other states with similar names, Saxony-Anhalt, and Lower Saxony. Together, they make up what was the Kingdom of Saxony, ruled by Prince Frederick the Wise. These are the heart of the Luther lands.

Three hundred years after the Reformation, religious persecution returned to the area, once again directly affecting those Christians who followed the reformer Martin Luther's teachings and theology as recorded in the unaltered Augsburg Confession. But this time, the persecution was different. The government was essentially forcing the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Reformed Church, what we would know in America as the Methodists and the Presbyterians, among others to ignore their differences and merge into one church. Essentially, the Lutherans were being asked to abandon the Lutheran Confessions, especially as found in the Augsburg Confession, in order to bring only one state church to the area; indeed, false religion was again the source of great troubles.

The direct descendants of the Reformation Church again found themselves being persecuted by the government for their faith. This was going on not only in Saxony but in neighboring Prussia as well.

Therefore, devout Saxon Lutherans, the descendants of Luther, Melanchthon, and all those who fearlessly stood down Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and the pope himself now some three hundred years later, in the 1830s and 1840s, were again being persecuted. This time, they packed up, boarded ships, and settled in Perry County, Missouri, a new world that would allow them to practice their faith freely.

The leader of this exodus was Martin Stephan, a Lutheran pastor from Dresden who appointed himself as a bishop after arriving in America. These brave Lutherans, the forebears of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, our forebears about 1,100 of them, wanted the freedom to practice their Christian faith in accordance with Scripture, expressed in the Lutheran Confessions, the Book of Concord, and so they bravely and faithfully followed Stephan toward the United States in November 1838.

Four of their ships arrived in New Orleans in January 1839. Not knowing that another ship had been lost at sea, they spent some time waiting there. Finally, most of the remaining 750 immigrants settled in Perry County, Missouri, and in and around St. Louis.

Later, on April 26, 1847, twelve pastors from fourteen German Lutheran congregations met in Chicago, Illinois, and founded the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States. Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, better known as C. F. W. Walther, became the first president of the synod. One hundred years later, in 1947, the synod changed its name to our present name: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

I take the time on this Thanksgiving Eve to give you a brief history of our own Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod because, while Thanksgiving is not specifically a church holiday, without question, tomorrow is a day that highlights God's great mercies toward his children throughout history. God continues to bless us with his grace that beautiful, sweet, unmerited, undeserved goodness he shows toward us, his sinful and rebellious children. What he's done for our church fits his pattern of grace always active among us.

That pattern of grace is all a result of God's one great act of grace. The gift of God's one and only Son, Jesus Christ, who took our sin upon himself and paid for those sins on the cross, is God's grace at work. And that one act of grace, Jesus' death on the cross since it removed the sin that would have ever separated us from all of God's gifts and now instead has reconciled us to him as dear children that one act of grace has made possible every other gift for every person.

The gift of the Garden given to our first parents is God's grace at work. The gift of the Promised Land promised to Abraham, shown to Moses before his death, and given to the people who entered into the Promised Land is God's grace at work. The protection afforded the Wittenberg reformer, Dr. Martin Luther, as he faced kings and emperors and pope, in order to proclaim fearlessly the pure, life-giving Gospel of Jesus Christ salvation by grace through faith, without any work of our own that is truly God's grace at work, in so many ways!

The exodus of our own forebears those brave Saxons who had their hand firmly on the Gospel as recorded in Holy Scripture, who, when challenged, refused to let go of that Gospel and instead chose to leave their own country behind in order to practice their God-given faith freely here in America this is God's grace at work!

And the fact that you and I are here this evening, worshiping this same God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob this is God's grace at work. For this same God protected our own ancestors, whoever they might be original immigrants to the first thirteen colonies or perhaps refugees just a few decades back. Whatever the background, whether the trip to America was one of optimism or one of terror, these are our ancestors, whom God has promised never to leave or forsake.

We recall the words of the psalmist in Psalm 121: ***"I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand.***

The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."

Thanksgiving is a day to remember God's grace his living, active, all-powerful, and all-forgiving grace and that is why we gather here today. We gather to worship God. We gather to receive grace upon grace as we read God's Holy Scripture and hear his Word being preached to us. We received grace and forgiveness as our sins were washed from us in those waters of Baptism. We receive grace and forgiveness of sins as we receive Jesus' body and blood in, with, and under the elements of the bread and wine.

Happy Thanksgiving!

In the name of God the Father, who created us, in the name of God the Son, who by his blood has redeemed us, and in the name of God the Holy Spirit, who made our bodies to be his own holy temple and gives us that same faith that bestows God's grace at work.

Amen