Text: Deuteronomy 8:1-10

Thanksgiving is a strange creature. It is something that quite close to the religious impulse itself. At some point I think all creature – at least all humans – have that moment of supreme humility. We all recognize how utterly unworthy we are, and yet we are the recipients of providence beyond our measure. Sometimes it might be the birth of a child. Sometimes is might be when the bullet whistled past the ear. Sometimes it might just be in the quiet of the night. And the only response is heartfelt thank you. Like what I’m assuming spurred the 10 the leper. “Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet.” Because that is what you do at those moments. Of course as Jesus recognizes only 10% of those healed recognized the moment. And none of the ones who were supposedly instructed. Just a Samaritan. There is another secret there. The further we are from providence when it appears, the more we are able to see it.

But as close as thanksgiving is to the basic religious impulse, Thanksgiving proper is not on the church calendar. It is a civil declaration. Now that wouldn’t prevent a church themselves from declaring such a day, but Thanksgiving as a day in the United States has always been at the proclamation of the civil magistrate. Whether that was Governor William Bradford’s of Plymouth Colony, George Washington’s or Joseph Bidens. I think over the years I’ve read every one of the Thanksgiving proclamations. And there are better and worse ones. Of course Lincoln’s rise up. Maybe surprisingly, Calvin Coolidge – the famous silent Cal – in my reading wrote some of the most touching ones. The year he took office after the unexpected death of Warren Harding he wrote:

By experiences, such as these, men and nations are tested and refined. We have been blessed with much of material prosperity. We shall be better able to appreciate it if we remember the privations others have suffered, and we shall be the more worthy of it if we use it for their relief. We will do well then to render thanks for the good that has come to us, and show by our actions that we have become stronger, wiser, and truer by the chastenings which have been imposed upon us. We will thus prepare ourselves for the part we must take in a world which forever needs the full measure of service. We have been a most favored people. We ought to be a most generous people. We have been a most blessed people. We ought to be a most thankful people.

Cal – solid Calvinist that he was - understood what Moses was telling the gathered Israelites. “Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you.” And that the answer to any such privations and discipline is to make us able to see the manifest and gracious providence of God Almighty. The father does not disciple the son because he is cruel, but because he does not wish his son to grow crooked and blind. And if we look with straight eye we shall see I and be amazed. “Your clothing did not wear out and your foot did not swell these forty years.” We have been a most favored people.

George Washington’s reflected the man – it was always about duty. “Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor.” His reflection on why it is a duty is meaningful.

That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks—for his kind care and protection of the People of this country previous to their becoming a Nation—for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his providence, which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war—for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed—for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness,

It is the duty of nations to acknowledge providence – especially this one – because they are established and made firm only by divine mercy. “The LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water…of wheat and barley, of vines and figs and pomegrannates…and of honey.

Somewhere in there Moses moves from the promised land across the Jordan, into the Promised Land that he himself would cross into. “A land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing…”.

It is our duty to recognize and give thanks for the providence that we see now. Of course like the 10 lepers we are fortunate if we see 10% of the mercies of God. As Cal called out, “we are better able to appreciate it if we remember the privations of others.” Knowing of course that we rarely learn from that. Even though it is our duty.

But the grace of God is such that he does not cancel the healing of the nine who missed it. And he does not withhold his providence from the earth. The flood shall not come again.

And the grace of God is such that the time will come when “you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you.” And that land in not Canaan, or England’s blessed plot, or Sea to Shining Sea, but Zion. Amen.