

God's Grace At Work

Day of Thanksgiving – 11/25/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Deuteronomy 8:1-10 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 2, [Moses says to the people,] **“And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness...”**.

v. 10, **“...and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land He has given you.”**

Introduction

✘ Many people think of this Day of Thanksgiving as being a uniquely American holiday; a day when we think of pilgrims wearing black hats with big brass buckles, gathered with Native Americans wearing headdresses and buckskin clothing; a day started by George Washington when he first assigned the last Thursday in November to gather and thank the Lord for His care and protection and many blessings throughout the last year.

→ But you know, the LORD has been providing for the people of His Creation long before America ever existed; ever since He created our first parents, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Years later He directed the people of Israel to celebrate the Feast of Booths in Deuteronomy 16 where they gave thanks for the wheat and grape harvest each year; praising God for the bountiful gift of food, land and the provision of His people.

→ And it has continued around the world, throughout history because God continues to give 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. Genesis 2:15 says, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it”.

→ Later, God, through a covenant, gave a land – a holy land – to His people. To Abraham, he said, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15:18). And of course even later, after Moses led the Hebrews out of their Egyptian bondage and through 40 years of wandering in the desert we’re told, “Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land. ... And the LORD said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, “I will give it to your offspring”” (Deut. 34:1, 4).

✘ The gift of a land to call our own – that’s been God’s pattern from the beginning. This day, Thanksgiving Day, exemplifies and highlights this grace, 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 American Christians thank God for this particular land where we enjoy the ability to worship Him without persecution; a land that produces much good food; a land where we can raise our families and build our homes; a land in which we are privileged to live out the days of our earthly lives.

I. The pattern of God’s grace in the Lutheran Church

✘ But God’s gracious gifts are not only about land, are they? On this Thanksgiving Day I want to remind you that we, as Christians of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, should 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 95 Theses on the castle church door in Wittenberg, October 31, 1517. You see, many of the events of the Reformation took place in Saxony, which at the time was essentially a kingdom. Germany was not a unified country then

as we know it today. The Kingdom of Saxony at that time was ruled by Prince Frederick the Wise.

→ Fast-forward 300 years and we see that religious persecution reared its ugly head again in the same area, affecting those Christians who followed Martin Luther's teachings as they were recorded in the unaltered Augsburg Confession. But this time the persecution was different. It wasn't the pope like it was with Luther, but the secular government who was forcing the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Reformed Church – what we know in America as the Methodists and the Presbyterians, among others – to ignore their differences and merge into one church.

→ The bottom line was that the Lutherans were being told to abandon their Biblical confession of faith just so that the king in the area could pretend they were unified and say there was only one state church. So just as it was for Luther, false religion was again the source of their trouble – both in Saxony and in neighboring Prussia as well.

✘ So what did these spiritual descendants of Luther and the other reformers do? They could not stay and be forced to compromise the Gospel of Jesus. So they packed up, boarded ships, and settled in Perry County, Missouri, a new world that allowed them to practice their faith in freedom.

→ 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 according to Scripture. 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 their 5th ship had been lost at sea, they spent time waiting there. Finally, most of the remaining 750 immigrants settled in Perry County, Missouri, and in and around St. Louis.

→ Eight years later, on April 26, 1847, twelve pastors from 14 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. And today, the Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison is the 13th president of the LCMS.

✘ Now I took the time on this Day of Thanksgiving to rehearse that history of our own church body because, while today is not technically a church holiday, it is a day that highlights God's great mercies shown to His children throughout the history of His Church.

→ And He continues to bless us with His grace – that beautiful, sweet, unmerited, undeserved goodness that He shows toward us, even though we are His sinful and rebellious children. You see, what God has done for our church continues His pattern of grace that has been, and always is active among us.

II. The pattern of God's grace in eternal blessings to all.

✘ His is a pattern of grace resulting from His greatest act of grace – the gift of His one and only Son, Jesus, who took our sins and paid for them on the cross. And that one, sacrificial act of grace has made every other gift possible for every person ever to live in history past, today and forevermore.

→ The gift of the Garden given to our first parents; the gift of the Promised Land that was promised to Abraham, shown to Moses and given to the people who entered 40 years after

wandering the desert is all God's grace at work. The protection given to Martin Luther as he faced kings and emperors and pope in order to proclaim that we are saved not by our works; not by the pope, but by grace through faith alone in Jesus, is truly God's grace at work!

→ And the exodus of our forebears – those brave Saxons who trusted in the Gospel of God's Holy Word and refused to allow it to be watered down, but instead chose to leave their country behind so that they could practice their God-given faith freely here in America – this is also God's grace at work!

✘ And friends, the fact that you and I are here today, worshiping this same God; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – this is God's grace at work as well. For this same God protected our own family ancestors, whoever they might be: original immigrants to the first 13 colonies or refugees just a few decades back from Cambodia or Laos or perhaps slaves taken against their will, either from Africa or somewhere else, or refugees from places like Mexico or the Philippines or Russia or you name the origin of your family heritage. 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; never to 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 you going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore". As that last verse says, we are always "going out" somewhere or "coming in" from another place. And so, whatever our pilgrimage here on earth might be, our ultimate journey as Christians is always headed to our heavenly home with Jesus. This too is God's grace at work!

→ So today, we, some of whom are immigrants ourselves; many of whom are descendants of immigrants; we give thanks to God that He had His hand of protection upon each and every man, woman, and child as they came here to America; to this state of Colorado. We give thanks because of God's grace at work in protecting us all to bring us safely together today on November 25, 2021 to worship God in freedom and in truth and His Spirit of love.

✘ God's grace at work! Always with us in the person of His Son, Jesus, true God and true man, true Messiah for the world, this is what we are most thankful for today; His pattern of grace; His living, active, all-powerful, all-forgiving and undeserving love for us – this is why we gathered here today, isn't it? We gather to worship our one-of-a-kind God; we gather to hear and learn about and receive His grace as His Holy Word passes from my lips through your ears and into your hearts and minds and souls. We celebrate His grace and forgiveness where and when He washed our sins from us in the waters of Baptism. And we partake of His grace and forgiveness as Jesus' body and blood, given and shed on the cross, feeds and strengthens us in, with, and under the elements of the bread and wine that pass over our tongues in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

→ Yes friends, this is God's pattern! The pattern where He finds us, horribly and irrevocably lost at birth and then through His Son, He saves us from the bonds of Satan and death; from our slavery to sin so that we now reside forever as citizens of heaven through His Son, Jesus. Oh, we have so much for which to be thankful today!

✘ So Happy Thanksgiving, my friends and family of Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church. Your presence here is living proof of God's grace at work. Amen.