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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/23/2011, Thanksgiving Eve
Deuteronomy 8:7-18, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, Luke 17:11-19
A Good Land

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me begin this sermon by lifting up a line from our First Lesson, from Deuteronomy 8:

⁷For the LORD your God is bringing you into *a good land*, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, ⁸a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey...

This evening's Bible readings ask *God's people* to be a *grateful people*. Especially our text invites us to delight in the wonders of God's creation. Just as well we have reason to delight in the wonders of our redemption and our sanctification -- the second and the third of the works of the Holy Trinity directed toward us. But this is Thanksgiving Eve. It is time to be mindful of the first of those divine works. It is time to give thanks for creation and our God's continual care by which we have bread on the table and air in our lungs and so many good things to keep us alive and to delight the soul.

We are city folk, and it might have been a long time since we were familiar with the land, with planting and timely rains and harvesting. But I am like some of you: I wasn't born in the city, but rather grew up in farming country. So, let me speak a little about the land, especially about good land.

GARFIELD BILBROUGH

I have mentioned my grandfather to you before. For me, he had a lovely sounding name: Garfield Bilbrough. He was tall, lean, big-boned man -- Abraham Lincoln like. He was a quiet man, but when he spoke, people listened.

My grandfather was a man of the land and of the river. They say that back in Depression days, when a poor family needed food, the townsfolk would tell them to go to my grandfather's place. "Go to Gar's farm. He'll feed you." And he did. The Depression had little impact on day-to-day life for my grandparents because they lived off the land and off the river. Life went on, there on the farm, no matter the twists and turns of the economy.

I have many images of my grandfather in my mind. For one thing, I think of his hands -- big, strong hands -- and how he would wash them in the wash basin after coming in from work.

Another of those childhood images that lingers in my mind is that of my grandfather hoeing the good earth. He had what is called a “truck farm.” I fear that the days of truck farms are dying out. But when I was a boy, they were pretty common, at least on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. My grandfather had no tractor, he had no combine. He had a hoe and an old Ford pick-up truck. He had peach baskets and bushel baskets, and what he could harvest, he would pack in the back of his truck and take it to the farm market in town. It was small-scale farming.

So, I retain the image of my grandfather hoeing. Before we went out to the field, he would sharpen his hoe. He’d sit there with the hoe turned up, so that he could run his file along the edge.

Then, around the growing plants, he was like a surgeon with that hoe. What you want to do is to lift up the little weeds, without destroying the string beans or the squash. The blade of the hoe needs to come close enough to the young plant to actually get the weeds that might strangle that young plant, but not so close that you nick or cut down the crop.

The Maryland sun shines down, the clouds drift across the blue sky, the hours pass, and that hoe cleans and tidies the field.

Prosperous farmers have irrigation. I can go home to Maryland in the summer time, and when I drive around the back country roads, my car has sometimes to duck the arc of water soaring out from the irrigation, lest that water splash onto the car. Well, water from the irrigation has hit my car many times and never done it any harm, I reckon.

But my grandfather was not a prosperous farmer, and he did not have irrigation. When you are a simple farmer like that, you become especially mindful of God’s good blessings of sun and earth and rain in due season.

But then, no matter how prosperous the farmer or how impressive the John Deere tractors and harvesters, still, a farmer can hardly forget the divine dimension of crops in the field. The farmer sows the seed, and hoes the weeds, but has no sure mechanics by which he can cause that seed to grow. Farming forever remains a mystery. Or rather, farming forever remains a miracle of God’s grace. For it is God who gives the increase, and that the farmer knows right well.

DEUTERONOMY 8

In this evening’s Bible reading from Deuteronomy, Moses is preparing the Israelites for a destiny that he knows he himself will not see. They will, but he will not. He is an old man, and it is not the Lord’s will that he cross the Jordan. They stand tiptoe on Mount Pisgah, on yonder side of the Jordan River. With their mind’s eye at least, they can see the Promised Land. It is a better land than they have known for a long time. For forty years they have wandered in the desert. That they lived was a daily miracle of God, who provided them with manna from heaven and water from a rock. They survived on that simple food and drink. God provided all that was necessary:

⁴The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. (Deuteronomy 8:4, NRSV)

Still, it had been a sparse manner of life. They could recognize God's providence, but it was simple fare, year after year, for a generation.

But now they are about to enter the Promised Land. Their provision will be grander. It will be a good land, as our text says:

⁷For the LORD your God is bringing you into *a good land*, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, ⁸a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey...

And that is great! Such provision would surely be welcome to them.

But the thing is, with this increase of prosperity could come an increase in forgetfulness. Moses warns the people about this:

¹¹Take heed lest you forget the LORD your God... ¹²lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God... ¹⁷Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth."

Charles Spurgeon, in his great exposition of Psalm 103, has an interesting note about human memory. Psalm 103 opens in a happy way:

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

²Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:

This resolve of the Psalmist to "forget not all his benefits" leads Spurgeon to note our tendency to remember troubles and to forget benefits:

Memory is very treacherous about the best things; by a strange perversity, engendered by the fall, it treasures up the refuse of the past and permits priceless treasures to lie neglected, it is tenacious of grievances and holds benefits all too loosely.

But Moses wants the people of God to be a grateful people, in good season and in bad. When they were in hard times in the desert, the Lord held them up in his

arms. And he does so still, even when the times are good. Whatever our circumstances then, let us give thanks to God.

THE HOTEL WORKER.

My wife, Carol, recently told me a charming story about one of the elderly residents at The Wartburg. She had asked him about his career. It turns out that he had been on the staff of a lovely hotel here in New York City. He did his work fair and square and he seems to have delighted in the people he met and served there at the hotel.

One day, he helped a lady out of the taxi in front of the hotel, and as he was doing so, he noticed that she dropped a bundle of money. It was a quite a lot of money, but the old man was not tempted to keep it for himself. Instead, he simply picked up the money and gave it back to the lady. She, in turn, was so grateful for his honesty that she told him to keep the money.

That would have been nice, but the old man did not want to take advantage of the lady's gratitude, so he refused to take the money.

She, then, added money to it, and insisted that he take it all, which finally he did.

Now, it turned out that this lady was the famous actress Greta Garbo, and probably she could afford the money. But whether she could afford it or not, it was the impulse of her heart that is so wonderful. She was grateful and rushed to express her gratitude.

THANKSGIVING DAY

That is what Thanksgiving Day is about. It is a day when we are invited to rush to express our gratitude to our God.

For some of us, these days might be the forty years of desert time. Here in our land, "the times are tough now, just getting tougher."¹ But during their wilderness time, the Israelites were upheld by God, and maybe along your way, you too have some sense that though you are in a rough stretch of life, God keeps his eye upon you and "underneath are the everlasting arms." (Deuteronomy 33:27, KJV)

And if this happens to be a happy time, all the more reason to give thanks to God. After all, it is not simply our own power that has won us these good things, for it is our holy God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who has given us whatever powers we have, and to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.

¹ Bruce Springfield, "Cover Me"