

Sermon for November 20, 2016  
Sunday before Thanksgiving  
“Being A Wandering Aramean”

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

We are a nation of immigrants. We all came from somewhere else. Some like the Pilgrims crossed the Atlantic Ocean on ships seeking freedom and a new life. Some came across the Pacific Ocean seeking opportunity farther east in the American West. Some were taken captive and brought over against their will on slave ships. Even the Native Americans' ancestors walked here from Siberia if you go far enough back.

My own Family came here from Europe. Some branches of my mother's family go back to the Revolution and had immigrated from France and Britain. But my father's family came more recently. Both my paternal grandparents came from Scotland in the early 1900's. On my 13th birthday my grandfather told me how he went to work in the coalmines of Scotland when he was 13. When he finally had the means he came to America looking for opportunity.

As a nation of immigrants, Thanksgiving is truly our unique American holiday. It recalls our immigrant roots. It retells the story of a group of immigrants in a new and strange land fighting to survive. It memorializes their struggle for freedom and symbolizes our ongoing struggles for liberty, hope, and a better future. It also acknowledges God as the source of help in the midst of a difficult, cold, and drastically changing world.

Thanksgiving, in its American form, is uniquely American, but setting aside a day for giving thanks is not as unique as one might think. You see Israel had a very similar Thanksgiving Day. Like us Israel was a nation of immigrants. For 400 years they had been slaves in Egypt before they immigrated for 40 years to the Promised Land seeking freedom. Like American immigrants, they found a land flowing with milk and honey, but also filled with new dangers. Even Abraham and Sarah, who were the first to receive the promise of the land, had been immigrants from Ur.

Before Israel entered the land, God told them to set aside a day to give thanks. It was a festival of the first fruits. It would have been earlier in the year than our Thanksgiving, but the idea was the same. God told them to bring the first fruits and offer them to God in thanksgiving for the blessings he had given them.

And as part of this they were told to give a specific response. It starts, “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” It then goes on to recall the exodus and the gift of the Promised Land. It all ends with guess what? A feast! They might not have had turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie, but like the pilgrims, and us, they feasted.

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” That is true of us today. Maybe as we all gather at the Thanksgiving table this week we should all recite this passage before saying grace. We have traveled a long way to get where we are. It has been an exodus through a wilderness of dangers and pitfalls. All for the shining hope of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Americans have fought for centuries to realize freedom. The pilgrims fought disease and the elements to find religious freedom. As a nation we fought for our independence and the right to govern ourselves. In the 1860’s we fought so that the statement “All men are created equal” could be applied to men of color. Then we struggled so that the working class would have rights and so that “All men are created equal” could apply to women. We fought 2 world wars to free the world of violence and tyranny. We fought a cold war to remain free from communism. We have fought for civil rights and human rights. And now we struggle to find peace.

Our ancestors were wanderers in the world seeking the promised land of freedom. We didn’t arrive at this place on our own. Generations of others took risks, even gave their lives, so that we could live in this promised land of the United States. “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” Whether your ancestors arrived on ocean liners, slave ships, land bridges, or more recently jet planes; we all owe a debt to the sacrifices of the past. And we owe thanks to God for allowing us to live here in this time.

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” We have wandered quite a ways in recent past. We have been through recessions and economic woes. We have experienced violence and hatred from the outside and from within. We have seen racial tensions erupt in our streets. We have been through the political wilderness of an election year. And I don’t think we are through the woods yet.

But, despite the troubles, we have much to be thankful for. Fortunes, jobs, our sense of security, faith in the political system, and even lives have been lost in the past years. But God was with us through it all. Just as God was with our ancestors through their trials. Just as God was with the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. God is with us now.

Those Puritan Pilgrims came to this continent fleeing religious persecution. Many of our ancestors also came fleeing persecution and economic hardship. Some came against their wills and have striven for freedom ever since. Let’s be sure we remember them and the people who seek to become a refugee from war and persecution in our day. And let’s make sure this country is always ready to welcome the wanderers and refugees in our world.

Then let us give thanks. Let us all join with the ancient Israelites and say, “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor. Who lived in slavery in Egypt and was brought out to freedom by your holy power. And so, we gather here to offer the first fruits of our lives in gratitude and thanksgiving!”