

How Thankful Are We?

Presented by Jim Hook on 11-26-2017 at Crossroads United Methodist Church,
Waunakee, WI.

Our first scripture illustrates for us the depths of the psalmists thankfulness and gratitude.

Psalm 9:1-2

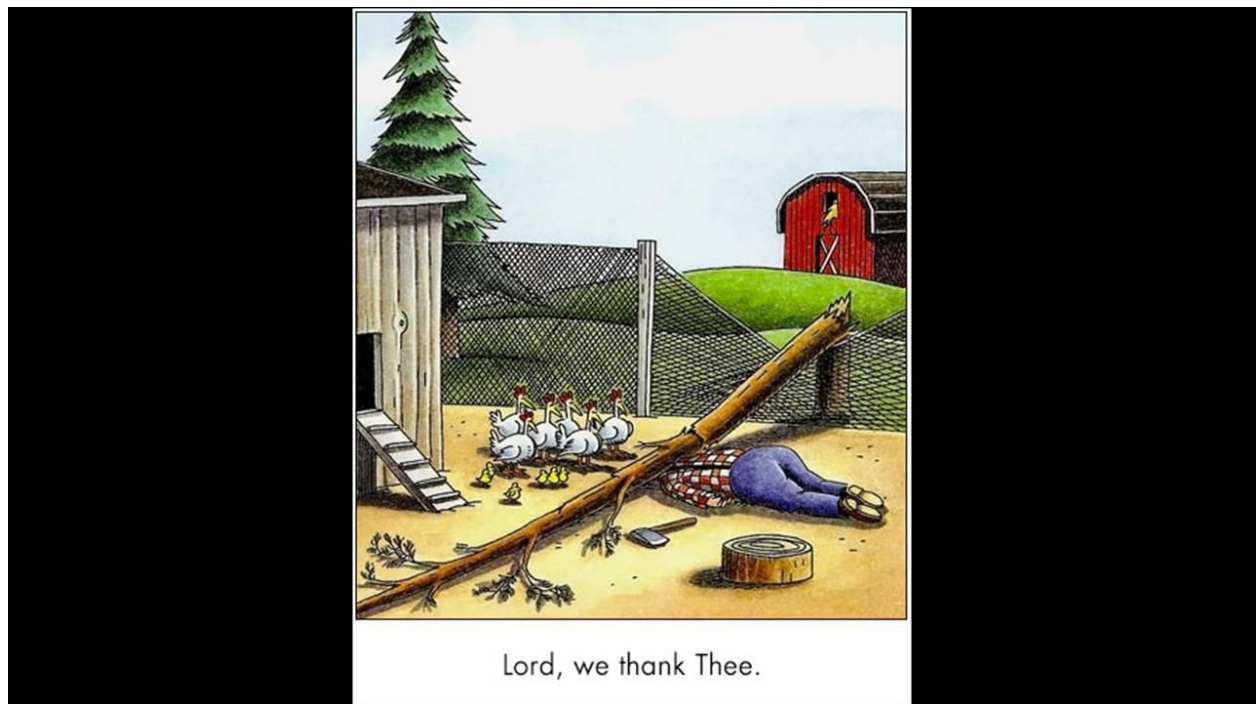
I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High.

Our second scripture describes God's providence in the lives of the early believers in the Jesus movement.

2Corinthians 4:15-16

All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

Thanksgiving means different things to different people



For me Thanksgiving is my most favorite holiday of the year. I wonder how many here have Thanksgiving as their favorite holiday of the year. Could you raise your hands? A little Congregation Participation. Why is Thanksgiving your favorite holiday?

It is a joyous time without the pressure of buying gifts for loved ones. Time of gathering with family and friend's time to be in communion with one another usually with a great

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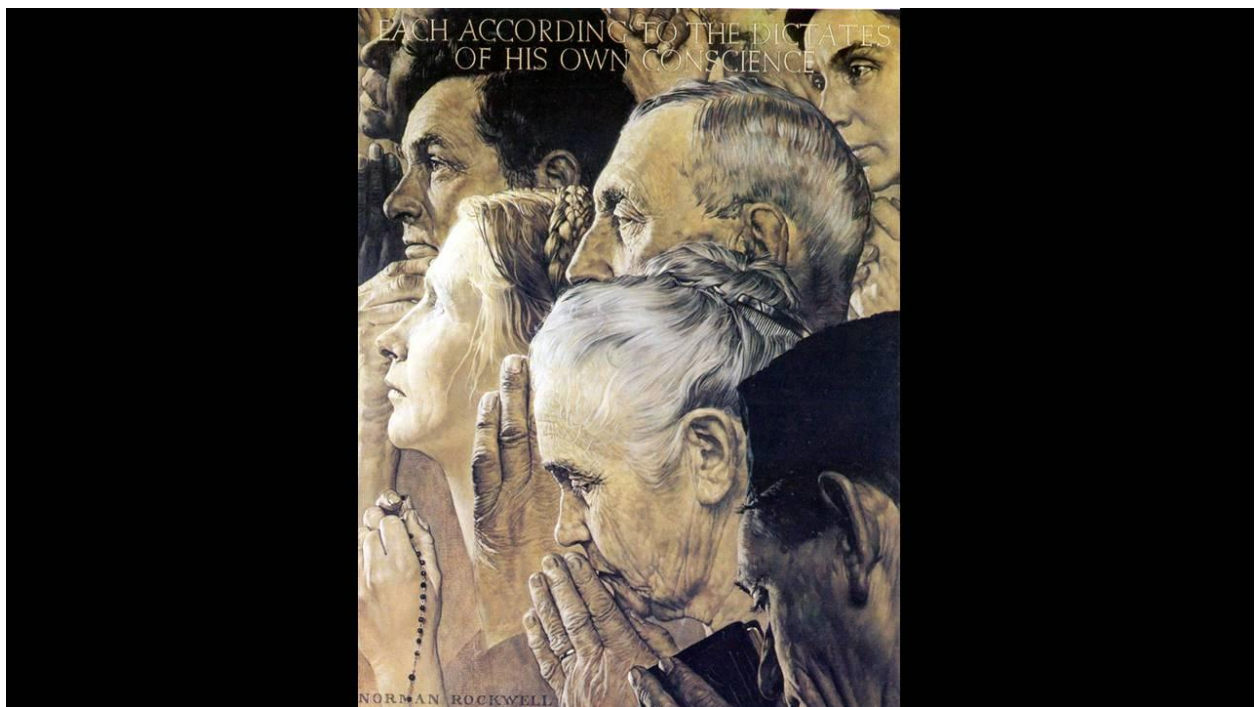
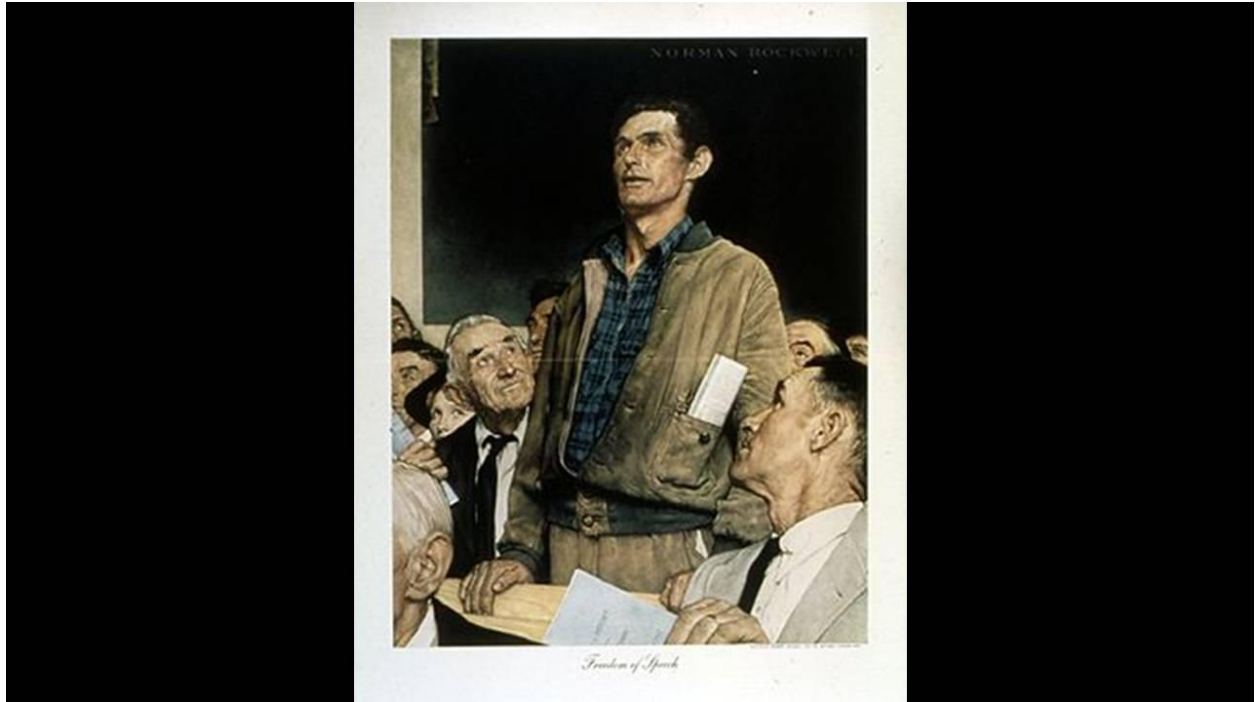
meal. It is a holiday where we take time from our ordinary lives to reflect on the bounty that we have and offer our Thanksgiving to each other and to our God. For me that is a real reason why Thanksgiving is such a special holiday.

The quintessential image of Thanksgiving

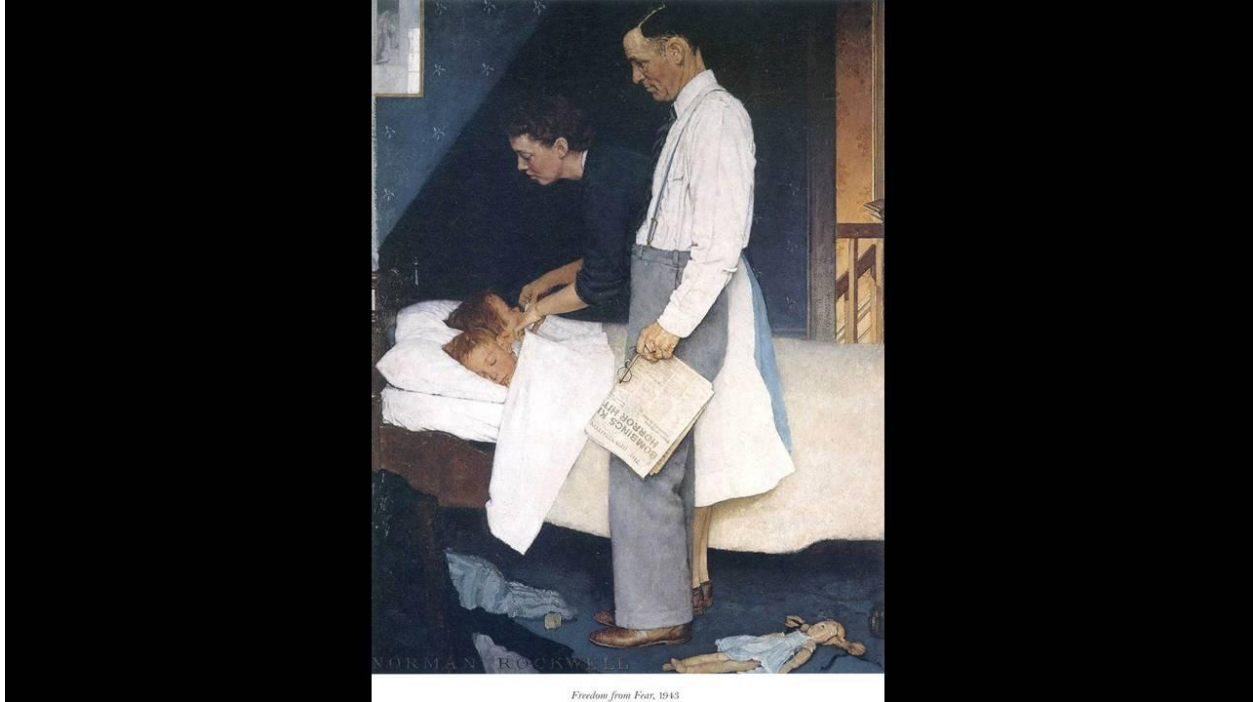


This is a Norman Rockwell painting he did in 1943. It is called the Freedom from Want. It is one of four paintings called the four freedoms. The other paintings are Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship and Freedom from Fear

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These four images appeared on the covers of 4 consecutive issues of the Saturday Evening Post in 1943. Norman Rockwell painted this series based on the State of the Union message the Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave in 1941 when Europe was under Nazi domination and the Far East was under the domination of Japan. Pearl Harbor was 11 months away. Certainly, then as now these four freedoms are precious and something we should all be thankful for.

As I was researching material for this sermon I read about the history of Thanksgiving. As children we all heard about the first Thanksgiving with the Pilgrims and the first Americans the Wampanoag Indians in 1621. I found out the idea of giving thanks for a bountiful harvest and other blessings goes back farther than that celebration. It goes back farther than when the Puritans who wanted to do away with all church holidays including Christmas and Easter and replace those days with special days called Days of Fasting or Days of Thanksgiving and my guess is with the Puritans there wasn't a lot of fun associated with those days. Thanksgiving goes back farther than the declared Days of Thanksgiving in England after a drought in 1611, floods in 1613, and plagues in 1604 and 1622. Farther back than that there was thanksgiving for the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Even farther back, during the English Reformation and the reign of Henry VIII in 1536 when he decided to create a protestant holiday for people to forego work and have a time of celebration in reaction to the large number of religious holidays that were on the Catholic calendar. For century's people, especially those in agrarian societies throughout the world have celebrated the time of harvest and done so with a spirit of Thanksgiving and gratitude, where they would thank their god or the gods for having provided for them for another year. Can you imagine how thankful those people in those early times must have been? When you are a community of sowers and gatherers the well-being of you, your family and

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your community depends on the success of the harvest. And from when the seeds were planted in the spring until they were harvested in the fall, there were a lot of things that could damage or ruin the crops. Too much rain, not enough rain, drought, too much sun, not enough sun, pestilence and/or disease, could severely damage the crops and lessen the harvest. In those times a very bad year not only wiped out the food for the coming year but could very easily wipe out the seed stock for the year that followed. Through it all these ancient people did not have the type of scientific understanding and knowledge that helps us better understand our world today (and even now we don't do all that well with the weather). They didn't understand the laws of nature. They felt that their success and the success of the harvest were greatly influenced by their relationship with their God or their gods. Given this understanding can we begin to imagine the depths of their thankfulness when they would get to the end of the year and realize that they had crops that were going to sustain them into the next year and the year beyond. I can just imagine the appreciation and thankfulness they would have for all that God that had provided them.

I think one of the spiritual challenges that we face today is because our scientific understanding that those ancients didn't have. I think that because we have a western scientific way of looking at much of the world, we understand natural laws, quantum physics; we understand the principles that shape chemistry, biology and the other sciences... in the places where people in the past would have looked for and found God. In fact, I wonder if one of the reasons for the decline in church attendance that we see now is because people live and understand their lives within a scientific framework and experience. And that framework creates a conflict for them when they hear about life experiences from a spiritual or religious perspective. I think this conflict represents a real challenge and a wonderful opportunity for us to continue to look for and share with others the experience of God in our lives that incorporates our western perspective including our knowledge of the laws of science and nature.

When we talk about God's presence in our lives what we are really talking about God's Providence. It is a phrase that is closely associated with early Thanksgiving celebrations in this country. The Pilgrims were thankful for God's providence. What is meant by God's providence? God's providence refers to God's continuous upholding of the existence and natural order of the universe. God's special providence refers to God's extraordinary intervention in the life of people such as when miracles occur. Different religions at different times have different ways of thinking about God's providence. The Catholic perspectives as developed by Thomas Aquinas describe the concept of providence as the care exercised by God over the universe and his foresight and care for its future. According to Martin Luther from a protestant perspective, God's providence means God created the world with everything needed for human life including both physical things and natural laws. He believed that everything people have that is good - is given and preserved by God, either directly or through other people or things. Of the services provided through family, government, and work, he writes, we receive these blessings not from family, government and work but through them from God. Since God uses everyone's useful tasks for good, people should not look down on some useful vocations as being less worthy of than others.

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Instead people should honor others, no matter how lowly, because they are the means that God uses to work in the world. John Calvin and the Protestant denominations that flow from that branch of Christianity believe in complete sovereignty of God, God's plan for the world, and that every soul he has created is guided by his will. The idea that man has free will and is able to make choices independently of what God has already determined is based on our limited understanding of God's perfection and the idea that God's purposes can be circumvented. In the Jewish faith, especially that of Orthodox Judaism, there is a belief that God is directing or even re-creating every minute detail of creation as is shown in the Jewish proverb, "The salvation of God is like the blink of an eye." And what were John Wesley's thoughts on providence.... That God is infinite in wisdom and power. That God's wisdom is continually at work managing all the affairs of God's creation for the good of God's creatures. In painful times, we need to focus on what's important. We need to know that God has not given up on us, that God loves us and is at work for our good. Which of these concepts of God's providence is the right one? The real question is which of these concepts speaks to you and your relationship and experiences with God. In a large sense this is what each of our spiritual journey is all about looking for God's providence in our lives.

We have talked about Thanksgiving and the reasons that we should be thankful including the idea of God's providence in our lives and in our universe. But is that enough? I wonder after we think about all the things we have to be thankful for and when we reflect on God's presence in our life if we don't need to think about one other question. How am I going to respond to all the things that I have to be thankful...for including God's presence in my life? How we answer that question will very likely guide the next steps on our spiritual journey. I have a confession. I must admit too often when I think of how I should respond to God's bounty I do so as if it is some chore or obligation. Either I need to give money to the church or some other cause or I need to help teach a class or I need to help spruce up the church or myriad of other things. When I do that, many times I deny myself the opportunity to experience God's presence once more. I have an example of the right way I think we should respond to God's bounty. Two weeks ago, we blessed the Quilts of Valor that were made by several ladies of this church and a couple of ladies from outside the church. I don't know if you all know this but there were 16 quilts up here that were made by these ladies when we blessed those quilts. 16 quilts. That represents a lot of time, creativity, energy, material and thread. The women that made those quilts did so out of thankfulness for those veterans that have served to provide and protect those four freedoms that we talked about the beginning of the sermon and many other things. It was with a sense of gratitude that they came together and worked and created these unique works of art. But here's the thing, when they came together and worked on these quilts they were in community with one another, they were engaged in an activity that was greater than themselves; they were experiencing God in their presence and experienced great joy and wellbeing because of it, and maybe a little frustration also which always happens with quilts I think. Their thankfulness translated into something that brought great

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joy to them allowed them to experience God's providence and created a wonderful and memorable gift for others. And the magic is that as these quilts are given to those veterans, my guess is they are going to be deeply thankful that they have been recognized for the contributions that they have made and they will experience God's providence and because those veterans have experienced that recognition, they are going to reach out and touch others in ways we will never know about and on and on and on it goes. This is just one example of how responding to God's call...being Thankful for God's presence in our lives does not or should not have to be a chore, but can bring great joy. Those are the opportunities we should look for as we progress on our own spiritual journeys. Amen and amen

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