

Feast of Christ's Reign

JEREMIAH 23:1-6

LUKE 1:68-79 or PSALM 46

COLOSSIANS 1:11-20

LUKE 23:33-43

A Festival of Thanksgiving

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11

PSALM 100

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9

JOHN 6:25-35

Last Sunday after Pentecost; Last Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 20, 2022; Year C

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Giving Thanks for a Reigning Christ!

"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor! He went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous!" This stirring line is taken from the dramatic liturgy the Israelites used in their version of one aspect of our worship today in *A Festival of Thanksgiving*. It was and is a glorious celebration of the Israelite harvest festival known as the Feast of Weeks. This solemn observance provided a grand opportunity to allow these ancient pilgrims to share their immense gratitude, to show how thankful they were to the God they believed was on their side. All activity ceased as they took time to remember what they perceived to be the best of God's blessings abundantly, solely, given to the children of Israel, a time to stop and be thankful to their holy deliverer. Sound familiar, heirs of pilgrim's progress? Yes, these graciously interpreted gifts were bestowed upon a people who believed they were a select few, specially chosen as God's own. These are the same people who were once tortured as an indentured tribe, long held as captives in Egypt, but were now liberated. They had been freed, empowered to settle, or shall we say seize, the land of promise, a Promised Land, a rich and fertile country metaphorically flowing with milk and honey. Yes, this land was formerly in Canaanite hands, belonging to a people considered pagan by their new neighbors. Yes, the Canaanites once held this sacred ground, a territory originally called the Land of Canaan. We have sung its praises in the haunting melodies of Southern Harmony hymnody. "Canaan, bright Canaan!" And now this battleground was claimed as an enclave

extravagantly proclaimed as Israel, seeds of discord permanently planted! Sound familiar? Yes, Canaan was already a great nation already founded and inhabited. In fact, its centerpiece, the holy city of Zion, yes Jerusalem, was once called Jebus, long before its takeover and renaming, the right and the circumstances to do so certainly questionable! The very name “Canaan” alone identifies the original, back in the day would have argued the true owners—Palestinians today no doubt still do—a not-so-subtle indicator of authentic possession.

The Book of Deuteronomy reminds us that at this special time of year, the Israelites were required to make a yearly sacred pilgrimage to the central sanctuary, yes, bringing the first fruits of the harvest, giving the best of their produce, to render to God proper thanks and praise. Their traditional practice illuminated an ancient ritual that in so many ways resemble our own version of Thanksgiving. Truly, the image of these ancient Hebrew pilgrims on a pilgrimage is so very akin, easily connected with our mythological images of those who set sail on their one-way voyage on the love boat called the Mayflower. In many ways, the Israelite story mirrors the hopes and dreams of our nation’s ancestors, intoxicating all those hopeful Pilgrims, filling them with all the excitement and anticipation they could muster when they first delightfully saw land, coming ashore and settling Plymouth Colony in 1620, arriving in their new world in the name of Providence even as their passionate religious persuasions were continuing to emerge and evolve, as they zealously embraced their newly minted post-Reformation beliefs and practices, giving rise to a strongly enforced Puritanism. Freedom of or from their religion was not an option, contrary to popular belief! Even so, as with any who assume they have found ultimate truth, they believed and functioned as if their faith was frozen in time, their modus operandi perfectly reflecting the brutal elements found in Massachusetts Bay and New England, throw in our five degree morning here in Eagle River for good measure! Just consider the story of the Mayflower Pilgrims at Plymouth as a seventeenth century version of the Israelites settling their perceived Promised Land.

And just as with the Canaanites of old, our Native American brothers and sisters would beg to differ regarding this romanticized version amounting to a perversely enforced imminent domain in the blatant search and seizure of the original owners’ property, taking by force, some would say stealing, their ancestral lands, all that belonged to their forebears, rich and abundant soil handed down from generation to generation, all leading to a violation of the civil rights they did not yet have along with the demonic American legacy of the infamous Trail of Tears and the advent of “Indian Reservations!” And we all should still have some serious reservations! The unvarnished truth is not often kind! After all, the losers never get any of the spoils, much less the right, the privilege, to tell their story. Yes, these numerous comparisons with the Bible that feed and fuel these familiar images are obvious and striking when with integrity we choose to peel back the layers of our own blinding mythologically interpretive rearview mirror. No conversation about the early colonization of our country can be told without mentioning this blight, this permanent black eye, a scar that will not heal

and that will always and forever be a part of this larger mythic narrative. Failure to acknowledge is an egregiously unacceptable oversight, yes, especially during this holiday season. These poignant reminders stoke the painful, yes, shameful, context behind the Deuteronomic narrative as well, complementing our frequently whitewashed version of the Pilgrim story! Thanks to Mark Johannsen I uncovered a history of this church written in the 1980s. I was so proud when I read this wonderful story of the evolution of the First Congregational United Church of Christ, Eagle River. Listen to this paragraph! “Recognizing tensions between American Indians (we would now respectfully refer to them as Native Americans) and non-(Natives), a proposal was presented to the 1990 annual meeting, urging the church to promote peace and good will among all people. It was resolved that this church would participate in a ministry of reconciliation by studying the issues that fuel dissension and promote dialog and understanding. A task force of volunteers was assembled for this ministry. During Lent the Diaconate organized suppers and seminars for the community, aimed at reducing conflicts and tensions around Native American spring walleye spearing. Local attorneys presented the facts regarding the (Natives) treaty rights and members of a local (Native American) group discussed how spearing took place, what happened to the fish, and how they were propagated and returned to the waters.” This was a bold move, a courageous attempt at beginning to right so many wrongs! The sensitivity to these cultural issues is a reminder of who you have been and continue to be as a beloved faith community, committed to social justice, hospitably welcoming and inclusive in your outlook. Kudos! Yes, the tradition and the story continues! Bill Maher, late night talk show host on HBO recently said about the early invasion of native peoples’ lands, “Either give it back, or shut the “blank” up!” Oh, if life were ever that simple! Perhaps complexity is the spice of life! All that being said and acknowledged, my goal today is to attempt to intertwine two very distinct observances, one, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, a secular holiday infused with sacred imagery, along with Reign of Christ, formerly “Christ the King,” the latest and final liturgical celebration to appear on the last Sunday of the Church Year, another gift from our Roman Catholic forebears as we cycle through the Christian church calendar. Thank you, Mother Church! Hence my semi-tongue-in-cheek, but very serious and literally meant sermon title, “Giving Thanks for a Reigning Christ!”

The Deuteronomic writer records in detail, carefully instructing these observant and original readers exactly what they were to do as they engaged this ancient liturgical ritual that marked for them a most grand and gratifying occasion, their coming into a land that would become their own, even as they claimed divine right, divine Providence, in their anointed conquest. Yes, they gave thanks, no doubt surely remembering the slaughter in the name of the God, the deity they called Yahweh, Elohim, the One they claimed to be the Holy One of Israel, affirmingly giving a blessed sanction to these horrific atrocities, ensuring in the bloody process that these new interloping inhabitants would seize permanent control and power. Who could forget? How could they forget? Yes, once again, we walk a fine line, knowing that

the writers of the biblical narrative composed their highly embellished and exaggerated, no doubt fabricated, tales from an incredibly slanted position, a deeply biased basis, a strategically prejudicial viewpoint, a clear agenda woven into their propagandized words. Even so, while the past may be repeated, it never gets a do-over and thus we are left to find ways to better interpret and better understand, perhaps in “our” permanently borrowed land finding ways to offer appropriate apologies including just reparations. **With all the mixed images painting the Deuteronomic story, along with our own complicated history, colorful as it is, all dizzyingly swirling in our heads, so many of them honestly negative, as we read the Bible and recount our own recent 402-year-old history as we celebrate once more the Mayflower landing, especially as the offspring of New England Congregationalists. Yes, it is as if we just got off the boat! it is nonetheless essentially important that we indeed find our way as we seek to offer gratitude to God today and always for life and living, even if and when it seems ironic in so many ways to do so. When we are literal about recalling all things historic, no matter or despite the facts of the case, the blood-stained footprints carving the oft painful pathways of history, it should give us pause, indeed, soberly causing us some serious reflection and contemplation about our ancestors’ duplicity, their collusion, and their willing participation. Yes, we are compelled to turn aside and do so!**

The Hebrew turned Israelite faithful were meticulously instructed as they prepared to joyfully and triumphantly cross the Jordan and enter this new land of manifest destiny proportions, that once they had crossed the river and entered this new and exciting territory, what they perceived to be a divine inheritance, that once they took possession and settled there, they were to take some of the produce of the fertile ground they had harvested and place it in a basket. What an amazing adventure it had been thus far, Egypt now safely in their rearview mirror! And it was only the beginning! Next, they were told to go to a place that God would show them, a place where the holy name of God would reside. They would then immediately go to the priest in charge, yes, the one currently holding the sacred office, and proclaim to him, because, of course, it was always a “him”, and repeat these time-honored words, “I am declaring right now before the Lord my God that I have indeed arrived in the land the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us!” The priest would then take the basket and place it on the Altar and the giver would then solemnly declare before God and everybody assembled the great refrain recalling the adventures of Jacob, the Jacob tradition inferred in this Deuteronomic narrative, describing this serendipitously free-spirited “wandering Aramean.” After setting the produce before the Lord, the celebration would then commence, giving thanks, yes, thanksgiving, for all the good things that God had done for this grateful giver and family. Let the party begin! **The Deuteronomic text infers that each individual was called by name as they brought forth these agrarian gifts, the fruits and vegetables yielded from the rich fields! The Levites, the priestly class, were specifically named, this group of pious religious leaders singled out in this grand procession. Interestingly enough, intriguingly so, carrying a most important and sobering reminder, what indeed seems a strange caveat when**

placed within the broader context of other apparently or seemingly hateful biblical narratives, was the intentional inclusion of the immigrants “who are among you,”, yes, those who reside in your midst, the people the Hebrew Bible interchangeably and hospitality refers to as aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers! Yes, in many ways this seems an ultimate irony, considering the totality of the sordid salvation history recorded in the biblical narrative. It is a reminder that we are all natives and that we are all aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers, and all at the same time! And that would include space aliens if we encountered them! And this is where the worm turns in our sermon today!

A sidebar of note: One caveat to mention about this narrative, you will notice that this sacrifice is no longer an unblemished offering from the herd, whatever domesticated animal was the hoof of the day, that these gifts consisted of fruits and vegetables, produce all, grown from the tilled soil, toiling in the sun, a reminder of the evolution of this people from a herding society to an agrarian culture, a huge shift in reality as well as in the spiritual life, revealing the religious evolution of a people no longer a band on the run, a tabernacling people, but a society now settled in what would be a most permanent way. Including God’s dated demand that a temple never be built, a desire that would shift out of societal necessity, it is a reminder that God once blessed the offerings from the herd while rejecting, even cursing, gifts from the ground. See the story of Cain and Able for a strikingly murderous story!

Yes, today’s Witness from the Hebrew Bible in the Book of Deuteronomy is a reminder of the complexities we discover when we carefully and honestly read what we once prejudicially referred to as the Old Testament. Allow me to introduce a new word today and that is “cherem,” as in the “cherem” narratives from the Hebrew Bible. These are the terrible texts that advocate for the annihilation of Israel’s enemies, the execution and extermination of those considered inferior, the very adversaries, yes, the enemy of God. These were those who were labeled unclean, deemed to be polluted by virtue of their non-Kosher birth, condemned to slavery or death because of their cultural ancestry. We read these very graphic and gruesome stories juxtaposed, yes, right next to other scriptures calling for the salvation of all people, the welcome and inclusion of everyone as children created in the very image of God. Yes, thank God and/or the writers, editors, and compilers that there are stories that especially, particularly, specifically, call out, accept, embrace, and affirm those classified as aliens, foreigners, and strangers. This is what happens, a natural occurrence, when different textual traditions collide, the merging of J, E, P, and D (Yahwist, Elohist, Priestly, Deuteronomic) sources creating much confusion for the casual biblical reader. Of course, there is a disconnect, more than just literary, an actual dichotomy, a realized great gulf fixed between warring factions. Yes, there was a presumed prejudicial mindset impacting all ancient peoples, but specifically characterized those who saw themselves as select, as chosen! Yes, the ancient Israelites often missed the mark while misinterpreting, failing to comprehend the matter of being a light “to” the nations and not “of” the nations, a matter of a preposition versus an

infinite the difference between life and death, hospitably welcoming and inclusive versus exclusively castigating, judging, and rejecting. **In the very same Bible in which we read of God's unconditional love and grace, we also read of cultural and religious prejudice, the inherent challenges always associated with engaging multi-culturalism, the dangers of defending tribe and clan at all costs, the vile repercussions of "us" against "them."** Clannish thinking will never get us to where God and the lovingly gracious Spirit of Christ desires and intends for us to be. You knew I would get around to Jesus eventually! The challenge in our reading any of these ancient texts, all traditionally regarded by many as sacred writ, as we read about God both blessing and cursing local inhabitants, inconsistent as it may seem, yes, God advocating for, yes, supporting, both saving and killing, slaughtering and sparing, we must read with clarity, with radically objective open eyes and ears, avoiding the dark lenses that literally color our perspective! We must acknowledge that some biblical content was wrong then and is still wrong now. Some texts are graphically antithetical to the Christ who reigns, the man from Nazareth who taught us how to learn, to live, to love in the world, passionately implored in his preaching and teaching, transparently illustrated in his mission and ministry, an exemplary life always calling us back to the great Shema Israel, the "Hear O Israel" found in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, you know it by heart, that we love God, neighbor, and self, with all our hearts and minds, all our being. And that does not mean mere tolerance as some kind of cheap and easy baseline, challenging for some as that may be, but **demand acceptance and affirmation!** The rest may be biblical, but it is nonsensical, the equivalent of theological psychobabble, antithetical to a loving God who indigenously created us all as natives, making none of us and all of us aliens, foreigners, and strangers. As Martin Marty once opined, we are all strangers in our own land, sojourners all! All scripture is not created equal! Look around the world today, the conflict in the Near East, in Israel, Russia and its invasion and demonic attempt to annex Ukraine, and here in our own divided country, and we see the fruits, yes, the produce, of seeds once planted and germinated centuries ago. **A hospitably welcoming and inclusive, openly affirming, God will not accept offerings given from any exclusively minded position! Somewhere between open borders and "build a wall," there must be found some sanity and common sense, a solution to what has become an ongoing and growing crisis. There has to be! Smart people can figure out this kind of thing! By the way, as we give thanks today and this week as immigrants to this country we love, whatever happened to "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses" as our core welcoming and inclusive national value? Just wondering!** Just this past Thursday, a certain House member from Georgia (Marjorie Taylor Greene) likened the immigrant migration to this country to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, what a sick comparison. This partisan rancor, this level of saber rattling, does not help! These diatribes only stealthily seek to divide and conquer which is probably their intent and purpose! Sadly, mission accomplished!

Anytime we seek to give thanks to God we must always remember that our thanksgiving is never done in isolation, never given in a vacuum, but our gratefulness is always offered

against the backdrop, the greater portrait of the fulcrum of the drama of human history, even and especially in our currently unfolding human dynamics, yes, today's news. It is not a matter of simply giving God thanks and praise but is a reminder that we do so, woven into the fabric of the spectrum of human experience, the rainbow that represents all people. Unfortunately, it is important to remember that one person's thankfulness might very well be another person's regret! And that is why we walk by faith and not by sight, there by the grace of God we all go! As we prepare to celebrate the all-too-brief season of Thanksgiving Day, as this holiday comes and goes, and as we celebrate this one-day feast, this festival day now inclusively called Reign of Christ, indeed we give thanks to God for the Christly Spirit within and among us as divinely created images of the Holy and we give thanks for the one who makes us fully aware, the man of history from Nazareth. In Jesus, the human one, the one in whom we place our trust, we are reminded of the bigger picture as we seek to love God, neighbor, and self, acts that within themselves clearly show our abundant gratitude, our most humble thanksgiving. In him we have received the greatest and most gracious gifts of all, considering now that gift-giving and receiving is almost upon us, that day by day we continue to learn how to live and love one another and amongst each other, Jesus' preaching and teaching echoing in our minds daily, his mission and ministry at the forefront of who we are and how we behave as individuals and as the gathered community striving here and now to build church as a local missional congregation. **So, indeed let us join together and give thanks to God for the Christ, the one called the "Bread of Life" in today's Johannine lection from the Gospel of John, the ultimate example of welcome and inclusion, divine hospitality fully on display in every aspect of Christ's mysterious transcendent being, totally and completely revealed in the person of Jesus, illuminating incarnationally who and what was understood to be the holy presence of God, the One who sent him into the world to do some good, yes, as with all of us! Give thanks to God because God knows the level of our gratitude, the motives of our hearts and minds, the true intents and purposes of our heartfelt, mind-filled prayers! The good news, in the final analysis, is that God will sort out all our sacred musings, our thanks and praise and everything else good, bad, and ugly we might utter to the Holy One! And do remember, thanksgiving, true thanksgiving, always, always, demands our utmost openness and honesty, transparency, humility, and repentance!**

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and has given us a wonderful guide, mentor, teacher and friend, yes, Jesus. We are most thankful, filled with gratitude for the one affectionately and flatteringly called incarnate, the very Christ of God! Amen and amen.

Addendum to today's sermon, Patti Roberts offered these recollections about turmoil and violence at local boat landings, actions that led to this church's response, all leading to the creation of the 1990 initiative regarding relationships with Native Americans.

Fear was being generated that the local indigenous tribes in the area were spearing too many walleyes. Anglers were concerned that over-harvesting would deplete the availability of catchable fish. The pastor of First Congregational UCC at this time, the Rev. Jeff Wartgow, advocated for peace, attending many talks considering both sides of the debate. To show the Native Americans the church's sincerity in honoring their traditions, including calls for peace, Jeff invited drummers, healers, and tribal leaders to the church for worship. They came with drums, burning sage, and joining in the fellowship. Jeff sat with them at the Chancel and participated in the ancient ritual of passing a peace pipe. During this solemn observance, the congregation sat in stillness and awe. Patti says, "It is my belief that our small but active congregation, through the leadership of Jeff Wartgow played a major role in creating peace through nonviolence during a very turbulent time in our community. During this time, I was so proud to be a member of our church. I have no doubt the Great Spirit was an active presence." After reading Patti's story I am convinced that this church helped diffuse what could have been a very volatile and escalating situation.