

THE SUNDAY NEXT BEFORE ADVENT
NOVEMBER 20, 2016
A SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM R. FLEMING



ABRAHAM LINCOLN SET FORTH A PROCLAMATION MAKING THANKSGIVING A DAY OF PRAISE AND THANKFULNESS. LET ME SHARE PORTIONS OF HIS PROCLAMATION. WHILE MANY OF US DO NOT REMEMBER IT, IT BESPEAKS MUCH OF WHAT THIS COMING THURSDAY IS ABOUT:

A PROCLAMATION BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:

THE YEAR THAT IS DRAWING TOWARDS ITS CLOSE, HAS BEEN FILLED WITH THE BLESSINGS OF FRUITFUL FIELDS AND HEALTHFUL SKIES. TO THESE BOUNTIES, WHICH ARE SO CONSTANTLY ENJOYED THAT WE ARE PRONE TO FORGET THE SOURCE FROM WHICH THEY COME, OTHERS HAVE BEEN ADDED, WHICH ARE OF SO EXTRAORDINARY A NATURE, THAT THEY CANNOT FAIL TO PENETRATE AND SOFTEN THE HEART WHICH IS AT TIMES INSENSIBLE TO THE EVER WATCHFUL PROVIDENCE OF ALMIGHTY GOD. IN THE MIDST OF A CIVIL WAR OF UNEQUALED MAGNITUDE AND SEVERITY, WHICH HAS SOMETIMES SEEMED TO FOREIGN STATES TO INVITE AND PROVOKE THEIR AGGRESSION, PEACE HAS BEEN PRESERVED WITH ALL NATIONS, ORDER HAS BEEN MAINTAINED, THE LAWS HAVE BEEN RESPECTED AND OBEYED, AND HARMONY HAS PREVAILED EVERYWHERE EXCEPT IN THE THEATRE OF MILITARY CONFLICT; WHILE THAT THEATRE HAS BEEN GREATLY CONTRACTED BY THE ADVANCING ARMIES AND NAVIES. NEEDFUL DIVERSIONS OF WEALTH AND OF STRENGTH FROM THE FIELDS OF PEACEFUL INDUSTRY TO THE NATIONAL DEFENSE, HAVE NOT ARRESTED THE PLOUGH, THE SHUTTLE OR THE SHIPS. THE AXE HAS ENLARGED THE BORDERS OF OUR SETTLEMENTS AND THE MINES, AS WELL OF IRON AND COAL AS OF THE PRECIOUS

METALS, HAVE YIELDED EVEN MORE ABUNDANTLY THAN HERETOFORE. POPULATION HAS STEADILY INCREASED, NOTWITHSTANDING THE WASTE THAT HAS BEEN MADE IN THE CAMPS, THE SIEGE AND THE BATTLEFIELD; AND THE COUNTRY, REJOICING IN THE HOPES OF AUGMENTED STRENGTH AND VIGOR, IS PERMITTED TO EXPECT CONTINUANCE OF YEARS WITH LARGE INCREASES OF FREEDOM. NO HUMAN COUNSEL HATH DEVISED NOR HATH ANY MORTAL HAND WORKED OUT THESE GREAT THINGS. THEY ARE THE GRACIOUS GIFTS OF THE MOST HIGH GOD; A GOD WHO, WHILE DEALING WITH US FOR OUR SINS, HATH NEVERTHELESS REMEMBERED MERCY. IT HAS SEEMED TO ME, FIT AND PROPER THAT THEY SHOULD BE SOLEMNLY, REVERENTLY AND GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGED AS WITH ONE HEART AND ONE VOICE BY THE WHOLE AMERICAN PEOPLE. I DO THEREFORE INVITE MY FELLOW CITIZENS IN EVERY PART OF THE UNITED STATES, AND ALSO THOSE WHO ARE AT SEA AND THOSE WHO ARE SOJOURNING IN FOREIGN LANDS, TO SET APART AND OBSERVE THE LAST THURSDAY OF NOVEMBER NEXT, AS A DAY OF THANKSGIVING AND PRAISE TO OUR BENEFICENT FATHER WHO DWELLETH IN THE HEAVENS. AND I RECOMMEND TO THEM THAT WHILE OFFERING UP THE ASCRIPTIONS JUSTLY DUE HIM FOR SUCH SINGULAR DELIVERANCES AND BLESSINGS, THEY DO ALSO, WITH HUMBLE PENITENCE FOR OUR NATIONAL DISOBEDIENCE, COMMEND TO HIS TENDER CARE ALL THOSE WHO HAVE BECOME WIDOWS, ORPHANS, MOURNERS OR SUFFERERS IN THE LAMENTABLE CIVIL STRIFE IN WHICH WE ARE UNAVOIDABLY ENGAGED, AND FERVENTLY IMPLORE THE INTERPOSITION OF THE ALMIGHTY AND TO HEAL THE WOUNDS OF THE NATION AND TO RESTORE IT AS SOON AS MAY BE CONSISTENT WITH THE DIVINE PURPOSES, TO THE FULL ENJOYMENT OF PEACE, HARMONY, TRANQUILITY AND UNION.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I HAVE HEREUNTO SET MY HAND AND CAUSED THE SEAL OF THE UNITED STATES TO BE AFFIXED.

DONE AT THE CITY OF WASHINGTON, THIS THIRD DAY OF OCTOBER, IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD ONE THOUSAND EIGHT HUNDRED AND SIXTY-THREE, AND OF THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE UNITED STATES THE EIGHTY-EIGHTH.

OUR MUSIC IS FILLED WITH THE ATTENTION WE MUST PAY TO THANKSGIVING OVER AND ABOVE TURKEY AND STUFFING. YES, THE FEAST IS REAL, THE FAMILY GATHERINGS WHICH ARE PRECIOUS. BUT WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT; HEAR THESE WORDS FROM THE SERMON HYMN:

*WE PLOW THE FIELDS, AND SCATTER THE GOOD SEED ON THE LAND,
BUT IT IS FED AND WATERED BY GOD'S ALMIGHTY HAND;
HE SENDS THE SNOW IN WINTER, THE WARMTH TO SWELL THE GRAIN,
THE BREEZES AND THE SUNSHINE, AND THE SOFT REFRESHING RAIN*

*HE ONLY IS THE MAKER OF ALL THINGS NEAR AND FAR;
HE PAINTS THE WAYSIDE FLOWER, HE LIGHTS THE EVENING STAR;
THE WINDS AND WAVES OBEY HIM, BY HIM THE BIRDS ARE FED;
MUCH MORE TO US, HIS CHILDREN, HE GIVES OUR DAILY BREAD.*

*WE THANK THEE, THEN, O FATHER, FOR ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND GOOD
THE SEED-TIME AND THE HARVEST, OUR LIFE, OUR HEALTH, OUR FOOD:
NO GIFTS HAVE WE TO OFFER FOR ALL THY LOVE IMPARTS.
BUT THAT WHICH THOU DESIREST, OUR HUMBLE THANKFUL HEARTS.*

REFRAIN:

*ALL GOOD GIFTS AROUND US ARE SENT
FROM HEAVEN ABOVE, THEN THANK THE LORD
O THANK THE LORD FOR ALL HIS LOVE*

SOME THOUGHTS FROM THE ESSENCE OF THANKSGIVING

DO WE GIVE THANKS FOR THE MANY MATERIAL THINGS WHICH WE POSSESS? WE HAVE PLENTY OF FOOD TO EAT, MANY AMONG US ARE OK FINANCIALLY, LOOK AT OUR STANDARD OF LIVING COMPARED TO MOST OTHER NATIONS. ALL OF THAT IS FINE; BUT WE NEED TO REMIND OURSELVES THAT THE SYMBOL OF OUR FAITH IS NOT A HORN OF PLENTY, IT IS THE CROSS ON WHICH JESUS SUFFERED AND DIED. WHEN WE LOOK CAREFULLY AT “OUR SUCCESS,” SO MANY OF THOSE ARE THINGS THAT FADE AWAY. WHAT DOES NOT FADE AWAY IS THE LOVE THAT GOD POSSESSES FOR EACH OF US. FOR EACH OF US WHO DO NOT HAVE THE FINERIES WE CLAIM, ALL OF US ARE BELOVED OF GOD.

IF WE ARE TO CELEBRATE THANKSGIVING WITH PRAYERS OF PRAISE THAT WILL NOT FADE. IF WE ARE TO GIVE THANKS WITH SMILES THAT ARE MORE THAN SUPERFICIAL, WE MUST SET OUR PRIORITIES STRAIGHT. THE ESSENCE OF THANKSGIVING IS NOT TO BE FOUND IN THE COST OF GOODS AND SERVICES THAT MAY FILL OUR HORN OF PLENTY. THE IMPORTANT THINGS ARE THE RESOURCES WE BRING TO ADVERSITY. WHAT STRENGTH CAN WE CALL UPON WHEN THESE EARTHEN TREASURES FAIL?

THE PROBLEM FOR MANY OF US IS THAT WE ALLOW THE PROCESS OF COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS TO DETERIORATE INTO THE HABIT OF COUNTING UPON OUR BLESSINGS. WE ARE PROUD, RIGHTLY PROUD, TO BE THE RICHEST NATION ON EARTH. BUT WE ARE ANXIOUS, TO MAINTAIN OUR PRIVILEGES AND POWER. WE ARE PROUD,

RIGHTLY PROUD, OF OUR PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS. BUT WE ARE ANXIOUS, TO MAINTAIN AN IMAGE OF SUCCESS. WE ARE THREATENED BY THE VICISSITUDES OF JOB OR CAREER, ENDANGERED BY THE UNCERTAINTIES OF THE ECONOMY, WORRIED BY THE LOSS OF HEALTH AND VITALITY. WHEN THE ACT OF COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS LEADS TO THE ANXIOUS CONDITION OF COUNTING UPON OUR BLESSINGS THEN THE MEANING OF THANKSGIVING IS DIMINISHED.

BUT ACCORDING TO BIBLICAL WITNESS; THANKSGIVING IS SOMETHING WE DO WHEN THE TROUBLES OF THE WORLD ARE STILL VERY MUCH WITH US. IT'S NOT A QUESTION OF WAITING FOR THAT MOMENT OF EUPHORIA WHEN WE SEEM TO BE CARRIED AWAY ON A CRESCENDO OF GOOD FEELING. TO GIVE THANKS IS TO TAKE UP THE SOMETIME TANGLED THREADS OF OUR LIVES AND PRESENT THEM TO GOD COME WHAT MAY. THANKSGIVING INVOLVES AN ACT OF THE WILL.

TO GIVE THANKS IS TO STAND UP IN THE FACE OF THE STORM AND DECLARE THAT LIFE IS WORTH LIVING. TO GIVE THANKS IS TO ASSERT THAT THE WHOLE OF CREATION IS ONE GREAT ACT OF GOD'S LOVE. MAY WE GIVE THANKS THIS THANKSGIVING, NOT BECAUSE ALL THINGS ARE GOOD OR EASY, BUT SIMPLY BECAUSE WE KNOW THAT THIS WORLD, WITH ALL ITS PROBLEMS AND ALL ITS GOOD IS CRADLED IN THE ARMS OF A LOVING GOD.