

# **The Work Is Blessed**

Exodus 39:32-43

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Harvest feasts of Thanksgiving were commonly celebrated in early America, but our current holiday stems most directly from the national day of Thanksgiving declared by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, in the midst of the Civil War. Here is the substance of that proclamation:

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 even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to 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 of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defence, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; 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 camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase 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, who, while dealing with us in anger 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 to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and 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 Hand 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, tranquillity and Union.

In the midst of our nation's greatest conflict, a period of prolonged suffering, President Lincoln called for the country to seek forgiveness for its sins, pray for those in need, and to thank God for the blessings we have received. In the midst of war, destruction, and death, Lincoln wanted us to take time to consider the blessings God had given us. We are reminded that no time is too dark to be devoid of hope and the blessings of God.

Our Pilgrim ancestors who celebrated that first harvest meal with our Wampanoag ancestors had themselves been through their own difficult time of pain and suffering. Their first winter had been quite severe; many of them had died of hunger. It was only after the natives taught them how to fish for eel and to grow corn that the Pilgrims were able to provide enough food to survive. So, after that first harvest, they celebrated together with the Wampanoag. Edward Winslow wrote that the purpose of that first feast was "so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruits of our labor." (People forget that eel was on the menu that first Thanksgiving.)

In Exodus 39 the people of Israel gather together to seek the Lord's blessing. They bring the fruits of their labor—all the artistic elements that when combined will create the Tabernacle of the Covenant. The list of items has something of a mesmerizing effect, inviting our imaginations to picture all the beautiful furnishings and vestments. Robert Alter writes that the language of this passage "has an incantatory or quasi-musical function . . . evoking in gorgeous syllables the sheer splendor and artisanal perfection of the sanctuary."

These items are assembled together. We are told that this occurred on the first day of the first month of the new year. For the first time everyone can see the fruit of everyone else's giving and artistry. Together, they have created something of great beauty. Moses saw what the people had done, all of their work, and Moses blessed the people and their work.

Scholars have pointed out that the construction of the Tabernacle models the story of the creation of the world in Genesis chapter one. For example, when God first gives the design plans to Moses, it is given in seven speeches that parallel the seven days of creation. The final speech is about observing the Sabbath, taking a day of rest from our work, as God had rested on the seventh day from God's work of creation.

In the passage I read a moment ago, we can also see the parallels to the story of the creation of the world in Genesis. At the end of God's work of creation, we are told that God looked at all God had created and saw that it was very good. Now, after all the work of the people, Moses, God's prophet and agent, looks at what the people have done and blesses it.

The Bible scholar Terence Fretheim points out that the emphasis upon creation does not cease here with the gathering and blessing of the work. Every time the people move about the wilderness, they must disassemble the Tabernacle and then put it all back together again at their new campsite. Every time they move, they once again enact the creation. They are recreating themselves and God's place in the world every time they assemble the Tabernacle.

Plus, the worship that is carried out in the Tabernacle is another form of creation. Fretheim writes, "The worship of God at the tabernacle is a way for the community of faith to

participate in the divine creational work. God's continuing work in and through the worship of Israel is creative of a new world for Israel."

In the midst of the wilderness journey, after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and the trials and temptations of the desert, the people recreate themselves by these acts of giving, imagining, building, and worshipping. In this way, they are transformed, awakening the image of God within themselves, as together they are shaped into God's people who will bring a message of salvation to all the world.

Scholars tell us that these stories of the Tabernacle were written down many centuries after these events supposedly occurred. They were written down while the Jews were exiles, living in ancient Babylon, after the Babylonians had conquered the nation of Judah, destroyed the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, and took the people captive. In the midst of that era of suffering and displacement, the people tell these stories of transformation, of community building, of new creation. These stories worked to inspire that generation of Jews to survive their exile and to hope for a better future.

Walter Brueggemann writes that the worship in the Tabernacle and its visual images represent a "counterworld to Israel's lived experience, which is dangerous and disordered. The counterworld offered in the tabernacle holds out the gift of a well-ordered, joy-filled, peace-generating creation." He then says that this explains why the passages are so detailed. "No wonder Israel took such care to 'get it right'!" Brueggemann says.

Again and again this week, as I explored the commentaries on this passage, the emphases were two-fold: that this is a story of people participating in God's work of creation and this is a story told in a time of difficulty in order to help the people carry on. So this ancient story fits so well with our American stories of Thanksgiving. In the midst of harsh life on the Massachusetts coast, after much death and suffering, the people gathered to share the fruits of their labor and give thanks to God for the blessings they had received. And in the dark days of the American Civil War, as every town and village and family experienced loss, President Lincoln invited the nation to reflect not on the darkness but on the good things that even then were being achieved.

This year as we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving, let us be mindful of these examples. Let us look for the signs of blessing in our own lives and in our world. And let us bring the fruit of our labor so that it might join together in the worship of God with the work of our sisters and brothers.