

The Feast of Tabernacles  
Leviticus 23:33-44; John 7:37-39

Old Testament festivals aren't always easy to understand, but there are some parts of this one that we should easily recognize. Verse 39, for example, makes it quite clear that this festival was to take place at the time of the harvest. We Americans have our own harvest festival every year – we call it Thanksgiving. And just like the Old Testament people of God, we have a feast as a way of expressing our thanks for the abundance God has provided us – although we only feast one day, while they spread it out for a whole week.

But if we can understand feasting at harvest-time, there are many elements of their festival that we don't observe. The first rather odd thing is the timing of their festival. Of course it takes place at harvest time. But it also follows hard on the heels of a fast called the Day of Atonement – a day for confessing sin and for repentance, a day of solemn remembrance that death is necessary for sins to be forgiven. When we studied the Day of Atonement last week, we saw that the High Priest alone was responsible for completing all the prescribed rituals, and we saw that this foreshadowed the fact that Christ alone, through His death and resurrection, can atone for the sins of all His people.

But what does that have to do with Thanksgiving? For if the people simply had to sit back and watch everything take place on Yom Kippur, they were intimately involved in every aspect of this great feast of tabernacles. It was the people who were to bring their gifts on each day of the festival. And it was the people who were to weave branches together to make booths in which they would live for a week. Instead of fasting in sorrow for their sins, they were feasting in celebration of their blessings. Could the two events be any more different? So why would they be side by side in their religious calendar?

Well, stop and think for a moment. The central lesson of the Day of Atonement is that we can't do anything to save ourselves – that we are helpless, and that we need someone else to save us. Isn't our utter dependence on God's forgiveness a good thing to remember when we prepare to celebrate our blessings?

For what if we don't give thanks out of an attitude of humility and dependence? Wouldn't it be easy, as we focus on all our blessings, to imagine that we somehow deserve them? Wouldn't it be easy to catch ourselves being proud of all the hard work we did to earn those things? Couldn't we find ourselves celebrating a festival of self-congratulation rather than a humble giving of thanks to the God Who has, in spite of our sins, provided all our needs?

This lesson of humility and dependence was underlined by the requirement of the people to live in shacks made of branches for a whole week. For as the people wove the branches of palm and willow trees together, they were reminded of a time in the past when things were not going so well, of a time when God's people lived in tents, not because they wanted to, but because they had to. As they slept and woke up in their shanties every day for a week, they were supposed to remember how their ancestors had camped out for forty years while they were wandering in the wilderness after their escape from Egypt.

The Feast of Tabernacles thus pointed not only to their present prosperity, but also to the reason for that prosperity. It pointed to the fact that God had brought them out of slavery into the Promised Land. By living in tents all week, the people were to remember their dependence on God. They were to remember that all they had was a gift from God.

But living in those shanties for a week also helped to solve another problem that many of us have at Thanksgiving time. For let's face it – many of us have a hard time giving thanks during this season.

The American holiday season begins at Thanksgiving and ends at Christmas. In our collective consciousness, it is first and foremost a family time. Many of us will be traveling to be with family, and many of our holiday memories revolve around time spent with those we love the most.

So, what do you do at this time of year if your family faces serious problems? What if your family is more divided than it is devoted? Or what if your family is far away? What if you are grieving the loss of loved ones? How can you give thanks?

It's possible that God's Old Testament people had a better idea of how to celebrate Thanksgiving than we do. Instead of gathering in their separate cities or in their individual homes, the whole nation got together for an entire week. It was a big party, and it gave everyone the chance to make new friends and to catch up with folks they hadn't seen since the last festival. And living in shanties made of branches, camping out for a week, would only enhance the togetherness, wouldn't it?

In short, the people weren't just celebrating their harvest, the things God had provided for them. They were also celebrating each other, the bond they shared by trusting in their Lord. And who can doubt that getting together like that did a lot to mend the broken hearts among them?

But after the meals and stories of the past year were shared, those shanties in which they lay down to sleep reminded them of an even greater reason to give thanks, no matter what their current problems were. Yes, we've already seen that those shanties reminded them of the time

that their ancestors had wandered in the wilderness. And we know that in the days of the Exodus, the discomfort of living in tents had gone on not just for a week, but for forty years, in the same way that many of their own problems had been with them for a long time.

But all during their wilderness wanderings, all during that long time of suffering, God had been with His people. Verse 43 makes it clear that God was the One Who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. It was God Who had made them live in tents for all that time. And so just as God had been with His people during the Exodus, guiding them through their sufferings in the wilderness, He would be with His people living in those shanties for a week. He would be with them in the midst of whatever problems they were facing.

And we also need to remember as we give thanks that the same God is with us now, even though we suffer, even though we grieve, even though we may not know where we are going. No matter what we are going through, we need to remember that in Jesus Christ, God is with us. And as we remember that, we can give thanks.

But you know, the Feast of Tabernacles wasn't just about celebrating God's gift of a full harvest in the present. The Feast wasn't just about celebrating God's gift of the Promised Land in the past. The Feast also pointed to a promise that God would meet His people's needs in the future. And this promise was made most clear in one of the Festival's most stirring ceremonies – the celebration of living water.

In this ceremony, the Priest would go to the Pool of Siloam, which was fed by the spring of Gihon. The water in the pool was called living water because it came from a flowing, and not a stagnant source. The priest would fill a golden pitcher and carry the water back to the temple, pouring it out at the base of the altar.

It was during the ceremony of living water that Jesus spoke the words in our passage from John's gospel. For it was precisely in order to fulfill the meaning of that ceremony and every other part of the Feast of Booths that Jesus said, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink."

You know, it doesn't matter what else we are thankful for during this season. Maybe on this Thursday, you will give thanks for your food and clothes, for your warm houses, for your family and friends around you. In this time of political and economic uncertainty, maybe you'll give thanks for your job, or for your bank account. And I'm not saying you shouldn't give thanks for any of these things. They are all good gifts from God. But at the end of the day, none of them can really satisfy you. For no matter how much you may eat on Thursday, eventually you'll be hungry again.

But Jesus promises a much more permanent solution to our problems. Just as He told the Samaritan woman at the well, He is the living water that will fill us from the inside out. He promises not just to give us what we want, but to give us what we need, to take the messed up messes our lives have become and to remold them and remake them in His own image. He promises that as we come to Him, as we trust Him, His Holy Spirit will live inside of us, comforting us and giving us strength, but also changing us, transforming our desires, redirecting the very focus of our lives.

For what did Jesus say in John 7:38? He didn't say that rivers of living water would flow into us. No, He said that when we come to Jesus in trust, when the Holy Spirit takes up residence within us, out of our hearts, out of the very center of our lives will flow rivers of living water. The love that God has so richly given us will bubble up within us and spill over, flowing out onto all those around us.

Who can doubt that a life marked by such abundant love, a life filled with the Spirit of Christ, a life focused on giving that love to others would also be marked by thanksgiving? Who can doubt that such a life would, in humble dependence on Christ, trust Him in the midst of our sufferings, reaching out to share His love with others who are suffering as well?

So, how can we possibly respond to such an amazing offer, and to such an amazing gift? Well, God's Old Testament people brought gifts to God, burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and libations, votive and freewill offerings. That was a natural response at harvest time, a great way to give thanks for God's rich blessings on their flocks and on their fields.

And such a response would surely not be out of place for us, knowing as we do in a much fuller and deeper way the extent of God's plan to save us. For we know exactly what God's plan of redemption cost Him: His own Son's very lifeblood. If God's Old Testament people could praise God with their gifts, surely, we should as well.

So, yes, during this harvest season, let's give thanks to the Lord for His many blessings to us. Let's remember that God is the true source of all our worldly wealth. Let's remember that God has given us to one another. Let's remember that God is the author of all our spiritual blessings in Christ. But let's respond to God's grace by showing and sharing the love of Christ in such a way that many others might come to know their hunger and thirst, so that others might come to know the One Who is the living water, the One Who is the Bread of Life, the One Who welcomes all who thirst for righteousness, the One Who promises to fill the hungry with good things.