

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 – November 27, 2024 (Thanksgiving Eve)

I know a fair amount about where my Ketelsen family ancestors came from. I know, for example, that they came from the region of Schleswig–Holstein, on the border between Germany and Denmark. I know that several families all immigrated from the same community at the same time and all of them settled in the same region of eastern Iowa, north of Davenport. And I know that this all happened around the year 1870 or so. That's a lot of information, all things considered.

What I don't know is why my ancestors immigrated to the United States. I wish I did. It would be a fascinating piece to add to the genealogy puzzle. But I do have a suspicion.

You see from 1848-1864, there were two wars fought in the region of Schleswig–Holstein, known today as the First and Second Schleswig Wars. They were border wars between the kingdoms of Denmark and Prussia. Roughly 10,000 soldiers died between the two conflicts. The control of lands changed hand. Kings and dukes got richer. Peasants got poorer. Communities suffered.

I have to think this was a major factor in the timing of their immigration. Whether they were directly impacted by the wars. Or whether they found themselves being ruled by a prince they didn't wish to remain under. Or whether they were just sick of 19th c. European politics and violence. They went to America to find something better. And they found rich farmland and a peaceful lifestyle. It had to feel like the Garden of Eden. “Is this heaven? No, it's Iowa.”

The story of my ancestors is one that many Americans can tell. We call it the American Dream sometimes, but really, there's nothing uniquely American about it. People have been immigrating from one land to another for the entire history of humanity. And the reasons why they do so usually boil down to the same set of circumstances: they were suffering in one country, so they moved to a different country. To a country where they could live and thrive and have peace.

Our Old Testament Reading for this Thanksgiving Eve is about some people doing that very thing. This is from the end of a very long sermon preached by Moses as the children of Israel end their wilderness journey and are on the verge of entering the promised land. And in this sermon, stretched over thirteen chapters of the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses has reminded the people of how they are to live in this new land. He has reminded them of the covenant God made with them and how they are to live in obedience to the covenant.

Now, as he comes to the end of this sermon, he reminds them how they should regard this land they are entering. Seven times in eleven verses he reminds the people that God is giving them this land as a gift. They haven't earned the land. They haven't deserved the land. It's a fulfillment of the promise spoken to Abraham. And they will soon cross the Jordan River to a new, abundant land, given to them as a gift from God.

To mark this gift, the Israelites are given a new sort of 'liturgy.' He says, “*When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there.*”

In essence, he's calling them to gather for a worship service. For a liturgy. A liturgy of thanksgiving. A liturgy of returning to the Lord some of what he has given them.

He also gives them a sort of 'creed.’” A creed to remember what God has done for them. Moses says, “*And you shall make response before the Lord your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.’*”

We are here today on this evening before Thanksgiving to follow the same liturgy and confess the same creed. Today, we take a small part of what God has given to us, and we return it to him. We bring tithes and offerings to place in the collection plate. We collect food for the poor in our Neighbors Helping Neighbors barrel. We collect baskets of supplies for the Community Action Center. In a few weeks, we'll help raise money for the Salvation Army and we'll help support Lutheran Family and Children's Services.

This is a season for sharing the bounty we have received. Returning to God our firstfruits to him and sharing them with those around us. In so doing, we are confessing that same creed as the Israelites. We are confessing that we are wandering people. People who have come from all corners of the earth to make this land our home.

Yet, like the children of Israel, we don't own this home. It isn't ours. We may for a time "possess" the land even as the children of Israel took possession of Canaan, but it's not ours. It's always the property of its Creator. Who grants us to live here as tenants on his land. Who invites us to make his home our home.

Abraham was a wanderer. Isaac and Jacob were wanderers. Moses was a wanderer. The people of Israel were wanderers. Our ancestors who settled in this great land were wanderers.

But I am also a wanderer and you are also a wanderer. For we are all tenants, people just passing through, people who, in our distress, call out to the Lord. And the Lord has heard our cry.

For we are born in bondage to something far more dangerous than the pharaohs of Egypt. We are born in bondage to sin, death, and the devil. And it holds us captive, enslaves us, and burdens us with suffering too great to bear. Like every person who has ever traveled to a new country, we are suffering people longing for a better land.

And what we receive is not Canaan or Iowa. It is the Garden of Eden. It is heaven. It is paradise. That is our promised land. With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders, our Lord has brought us into this place. He has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Tragically, when the people of Israel arrived in Canaan, they quickly forgot whose land it was and to whom they belonged. And before too long, a deeper slavery would begin to be revealed. They would begin to fall in love with the things of Canaan and disobey the Lord who gave them the land.

Even while the walls of Jericho were falling, before the dust had even settled, one of the Israelite soldiers was looting valuables from the city that God had told them not to take. As a result, the Israelite army was roundly defeated when they attacked the next city. They loved created things more than the Creator, and the battle has been raging ever since.

Sin holds us in its grip every bit as tightly as it held the people of Israel. Like them, we hold on too tightly to the things of this world. We possess them, we own them, we need them. And the devil is constantly tempting us to doubt whether God will really care for us as well as he has promised. Our lives are filled with worry and false gods. Like the rich fool in the parable, we lay up treasures for ourselves and we are not rich towards God.

And so, truly, the greatest thanksgiving we can give this day is not for the physical blessings that God so richly provides to us. The greatest thanksgiving we can give is for God's faithfulness to us, his sinful people. For as Moses would later write, we are his treasured possession. While we cling to the things of this earth, he clings to us. And he won't let go. He protects us, he defends us, he provides for us, and he dies for us. That we might always be his. That we might always remain in his promised land.

Like your ancestors, you are a wanderer on this earth. For this sinful earth is not your home. You have been promised something far better. So give thanks this day for all that you have. For all that the Lord has entrusted to you. But also give thanks for all that the Lord has promised to you. Sinful though you may be. Give thanks that you are his possession. And he is bringing you to a better land. Amen.