

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

November 23, 2022—THANKSGIVING EVE, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: "*Alleluia! Let us Keep the Feast!*"

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (Remember our blessings are from God)
Psalm 100 (Be joyful; the Lord is good)
Philippians 4:4-9 (Think about what is true, honorable, pleasing to God)
St. John 6:25-35 (Jesus is the Bread of Life—He will not leave us hungry)

From the perspective of our Church, Thanksgiving Day is in something of an oddity. The Prayer Book calls it a major feast, yet its origins are civic as well as religious. It is widely observed by the people of this land, but Christians in other countries generally do not keep Thanksgiving Day, at least not at this time in November.

Moreover, the popular observance of Thanksgiving Day among the inhabitants of our nation tends to be less about attending worship to thank God than it is about travel by car or plane to visit relatives; cooking up a feast at home; gathering family and friends; football on the field and on the big-screen TV; and for many, a satisfying after-dinner nap.

In the United States, the placement of Thanksgiving Day on the 4th Thursday in November does not reflect ancient Church tradition, but is the relatively recent work of a vestry member of St. Thomas' Parish in Washington, D.C., named Franklin D. Roosevelt, who became President of the United States and established the new observance in 1939. So, we encounter Thanksgiving Day as a hybrid, involving elements of civil society and the Church.

To complicate the matter further, the observance has widely recognized 17th-century origins in the celebrations of various groups, including Anglicans, on the North American continent. It is related, as well, to harvest festivals observed in Europe, as well as those kept by peoples of many ethnicities and religions around the globe.

And certainly our Thanksgiving Day can claim as its ancestry the three festivals of the Old Testament known as Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles or "Booths." These Biblical feasts, along with our American Thanksgiving, have agricultural significance, yet also feature a layer of historical recollection that honors the liberating and empowering purpose that God fulfills in history.

If all that were not enough, I'd like to point out one further feature in this odd and complex mosaic. I want to suggest that Thanksgiving Day can lay claim to representing the Original Feast. The Original Feast for Jews and Christians. The Original Feast for the people of this and every nation. A feast we want to keep, yet never can. The first man and the first woman open their eyes in the first garden, and what do they see? A world of absolute wonder and delight. Even in their inexperienced, untutored state, what can they do but rejoice and give thanks for the beauty and bounty that surrounds them? The first couple keep their own Thanksgiving Day.

We cannot join them at that Original Feast. The world we live in is shattered. Yet we do not forget that feast; it haunts us. The soul-memory of that unforgettable Original Feast motivates diverse practices of history and culture that drive us to the dinner table on this strange yet splendid occasion we celebrate as Thanksgiving Day.

Memories sensed by the human race, by diverse ethnicities and religions and nations, family memories as well, scraps of recollection from childhood—all these feel significant to us because of the Original Feast. We want to be there on opening day in that world of utter wonder and unparalleled delight. Nostalgia for beauty and bounty of a sort we have never experienced—and will never experience. Nostalgia for a feast straight from the untouched earth. Unknown to us, this movement of the heart determines how we set the table, roast the turkey, and tolerate the relatives.

Maybe this year we will get it right, at last. Turn off the television. Resist snoring on the sofa. Rather, taste the food as we never have before, and look into the eyes of those we love and smile. We may find ourselves in that place we've never been, but have always remembered in the deepest fiber of our being.

That this is our soul-memory is the only way I can explain why, whenever I read Genesis 3:24, where God kicks the humans out of the Garden of Eden, and places an angel with a flaming sword to guarantee we will never again return to paradise, I always start to cry.

So, we long to experience the contentment and happiness of the Original Feast, but then Jesus butts in. (He makes a habit of doing this.) He points us in a different direction. Not toward the Original Feast, framed by human nostalgia, what we see in the rearview mirror. Jesus announces something different: the New Feast that comes to us from eternity. He calls it bread from heaven. Bread that endures, never runs out, never turns stale or molds, food for a new and different life. This Bread does not belong to the past. It arrives here from the future, always fresh. It makes the present moment—which is all we have in time—new, a moment beyond the reach of death. In a flash, the Original Feast itself drops dead. Memory embalms it, enshrines it, but now it has only an artificial life, like old photos when the color fades.

The New Feast, however, is imperishable. It has passed through death, never to return. This banquet celebrates a triumph that cannot be taken away. This is the meal that, in the end, is the only one that truly satisfies. Jesus announces this New Feast. Were that not enough, He identifies Himself with it. I am the Bread of Life, He declares. I came here from heaven, straight from the Father's throne, not to take, but to give—and to give abundantly. Jesus does not rest content with hosting the event, preparing the food, serving the meal. It's Jesus we eat, and Jesus who sustains us—far better than turkey, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie.

Our capacity for God, our hunger for the Holy, is sweetly and deeply satisfied by the infinitude of mercy that we discover in Jesus Christ. Divine life without limit, human life at its fulfillment. Inexplicably, what surpasses our wildest imagining we find present in Him and available to us.

Nostalgia surrenders to renewal. The former plenteousness is met, matched, and surpassed by what the Lord gives us now. For, the Creator continues to make and remake the world at every moment. Jesus Christ does this by His teaching and preaching, His dying and rising, and His breathing new life into us—and all of Creation—through the Holy Spirit, so that we can die and rise and be filled with life that has no end. Thus, we find our place at a feast that depends not upon nostalgia, but upon the renewal flowing from the heart of the eternal God into ours.

How does this newness pervade the whole world? Preeminently through Christ's cross and resurrection. It requires nothing less than a profound death, one that is both human and divine, an execution of death itself. After which, newness spreads throughout this world, taking up its home above all in hearts, minds, bodies, and lives that are broken, and every place of suffering and grief, to vanquish death once more.

Where does this newness manifest itself without fail? Here at the Holy Eucharist, sacrament and sign of the New Feast. We gather here to be fed from the Bread of Life who is Christ, and to be refreshed from the eternal saving fountain of His Blood. To participate yet again in the divine directive that makes life not a short and bitter tragedy, but a joyous and eternal adventure.

How then shall we keep Thanksgiving Day? How shall we live the days that follow? Not according to the Original Feast, glorious once, but now dead and gone. We must live instead as celebrants with Christ of this New Feast, the one that never ends.

We do so by engaging in the practice of wonder. This is what makes us wise, for in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the 20th century, “Wonder rather than doubt is the root of all knowledge.”⁺

This evening, and in the days to come, one of the ways we can celebrate the New Feast is through wonder. Let us ask the Lord to open our eyes afresh to His world, beautiful in its foundation yet still more exquisite in its redemption, as it awaits a glorious consummation that will be even more stunning than we can dream of.

To the One who places us here in His world of wonder, and through His cross and resurrection spreads before us the New Feast of salvation and eternal life, let us give highest praise and hearty thanks now and to the ages of ages! * Alleluia! Let us keep the Feast. *Amen.*

⁺ Abraham Joshua Heschel, ed. Susanna Heschel, “Essential Writings,” © 2006, [SpiritualityandPractice.com](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com) < <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/21247/abraham-joshua-heschel>> 14 November 2022. Used with permission.
^{*} Adapt. Charles Hoffacker, “From the Perspective... Thanksgiving Day (C),” 25 November 2010, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org) <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/from-the-perspective-thanksgiving-day-c-2010/>> 14 November 2022. Used with permission.