Thanksgiving Is a Festival Of Deliverance for the Poor

H. Paul Santmire

Ionis Martin / Special to The Courant

The theme of this year's Thanksgiving Day in Connecticut would seem to be a foregone conclusion: Count your blessings. But there is another way to look at Thanksgiving that is rooted in the Bible. Call this the hidden tradition.

In 1621 the Pilgrims celebrated what has subsequently been considered to be the first Thanksgiving. Actually, it is a harvest festival, with feasting and games. Two years later, in July 1623, they celebrated what they would have called their first Thanksgiving. They gathered in homes and churches, and gave thanks to God for delivering them from a drought that had been threatening their crops for more than six weeks. Apparently, on that wet summer day many of the Pilgrims also fasted.

Those 1623 rites might be called a deliverance festival. The theme, known to the pilgrims from the Scriptures, was: God's deliverance of the poor. The Plymouth Pilgrims were more at home with that deliverance festival than they were with the harvest festival, given the precariousness of their lives at the edge of a hostile wilderness. The minds and hearts of the Pilgrims were profoundly shaped, indeed, by the memory of their voyage from the Old World, which itself was a kind of deliverance, akin to that of the ancient Israelites.

In our time, it is Judaism, perhaps more than Christianity, that has kept the memory of that deliverance festival alive at Thanksgiving time, due in large measure to the influence of a separate and earlier, but related, Jewish festival, Sukkot.

The word "sukkot" means booths. Recent scholarship has pretty much established that this fall festival had its roots in the wilderness period, after the people of God had been freed from Egypt. The festival was closely tied to the events of deliverance at the Red Sea and to the experience of divine guidance and care in the wilderness.

In those days, the people apparently lived a simple nomadic life, in tents (hence the appropriateness of "the booths"). They were sojourners wherever they went, a band of ex-slaves without a homeland, who struggled for survival and justice in a hostile world.

Things got muddled, however, when they arrived in Canaan. Although their great festivals, such as Sukkot, recalled the people's origins in poverty and oppression, and although the prophets kept reminding the people of God's will for justice for the poor and the oppressed everywhere, the people of Israel began to attach themselves to the material prosperity of Canaan with a passion. As they amassed wealth for themselves, they also began to forget the poor of the land.

We can trace a similar story in our own history, as Thanksgiving fasting gave way to feasting as the nation forgot its roots and celebrated the blessings of material abundance.

All too soon Americans found themselves overwhelmed by the prosperity of a richly endowed continent. All too soon a people who had huddled together in the open seas on a little bark called the Mayflower turned to amassing wealth, organizing troops and building forts to protect what they by then had come to think of as their property. They then called on those troops to launch attacks to drive out the native peoples, some of whom had originally welcomed them and helped them to survive their first winters.

It might sound spoilsport to try to argue that the main theme of Thanksgiving this year should once again be God's deliverance of the poor. Even more foolhardy might it sound to recommend fasting rather than feasting.

But consider the poor in our midst. Hundreds of homeless people daily ply our streets. They fill our soup kitchens. The unemployment rate in Hartford is gargantuan compared with the rest of the state, especially for minorities. Decent, affordable housing for the poor appears to be a dream that is dead. The infant mortality rate is shockingly high. Cycles of poverty lead to ever deepening spirals of despair.

Can the condition of poverty in our capital city be anything but a scandal to the God whom on Thanksgiving Day we gather to thank? Does that not mean, in turn, that our count-your-blessings approach to Thanksgiving must also be a scandal in the eyes of that same God? The question this year would seem to be: How can our Thanksgiving Day once again become a deliverance festival as well as a harvest festival? How can we recapture the meaning of America's hidden tradition?

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The United States Remains A Nation of Pilgrims

Gretchen V. Swibold

In many books for our youngest schoolchil
dren, the first American Thanksgiving resembles
set piece of pious and grateful Pilgrims celebra
ing their first harvest with friendly and helpfu
Indians. Tables are laden with turkey, cranberr
sauce and pumpkin pie, though there is, in fact, n
record of any of these things being eaten on tha
occasion.

Primary books generally tell also of the terr
ble hardships that preceded the first harvest an
give considerable credit to Squanto, the Englis
speaking Patuxet Indian who gave the Pilgrims
life-or-death course in survival.

As children get older there are books that do
fine job of describing gritty conditions aboard th
Mayflower and the backbreaking and frustratin
labors of life in Plymouth. The authors continue
be generous in their praise of Squanto's help, b
are afraid apparently to mention how he suffere
at the hands of white men.

How did Squanto happen to speak English? I
many readers know that before the Pilgrims a
rived Squanto had been captured as a slave a
shipped to England, where he learned English as
second language?

Why did Squanto stay with the Pilgrims? I

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