THANKSGIVING: OUR PILGRIMAGE FESTIVAL

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"You shall dwell in booths for seven days . . , that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 23:42,43)

I

You probably won't believe where it was that I first began to give this sermon serious thought. I would like to say that it was when I was reading the Bible, or something like that. But it wasn't.

A few days ago I had some personal business to attend to, and I made my way to my safe-deposit box, here in town. Soon I found myself engrossed with all those property records and security matters that are so important to so many of us: financial papers, insurance policies and so on.

Then I had a strange fantasy. I was sitting there cozily, with the door closed, in the booth that the bank provides for such purposes. And my mind began to wander. I recalled that news story from France, not too long ago, concerning the great bank robbery in Nice. Do you remember that? Thieves managed to enter the vaults of a large bank, ingeniously, through that city's sewage system. They ransacked everyone's safety-deposit box.

What would that be like, I wondered, if that kind of thing happened to my private papers? No, I don't have any pornographic pictures in my safe-deposit box, as some of the leading citizens of Nice did. That wouldn't be the problem. But what if somehow all my financial security were suddenly stripped away?

My fantasy went even further. I began to imagine what my life would actually be like if I, in fact, had no financial security at all: if I were unemployed, if I couldn't pay the rent, if I couldn't buy food to feed my family.

Those were very difficult thoughts, frankly, and they didn't come very easily. As I sat there in that bank booth, with all my papers in front of me, staring at the wall, I didn't really want to think about insecurity, uncertainty, suffering and hunger. I didn't want to hear the cries of my children asking me for food when there was no food.

As I left the booth and gave my box of valuables back to the attendant, I decided then and there that God was trying to tell me something. And that's how this Thanksgiving sermon began to fall together.

II

I suppose we could argue, if we wanted to, that the booth in the bank is profoundly symbolic of life in America, especially in towns like ours. I suppose that there are few things most Americans like ourselves care about more deeply, when all the rhetoric's been cleared away, than personal property and financial security. Our whole way of life is geared this way. Our very souls —- especially souls that remember the Great Depression — have been programmed that way.

It's no accident, is it, that the structures that tower over our great cities **are** not cathedrals, but insurance buildings. True, some of them may pop their windows now and then, suggesting that the whole quest for security might not be as feasible as we'd like to imagine. But, by and large, most of us live **our** lives in the shadows of the Prudential buildings and the John Hancock buildings of America.

Show me just about any American living in places like Wellesley today, and I will show you someone who not only wants, but who's already got, a huge "piece of the rock" salted away somewhere.

Ill

Our text points to a different approach to life. Instead of a booth next to a vault built on bed rock, where single individuals can go to tend to their own security, we see a flimsy contrivance of vines and sticks standing exposed in the open air, where the whole community is invited to come to celebrate the fruits of God's providence. Instead of a sometimes frantic quest for private security, we see a joyful style of life that attends to the needs of the poor and the hungry, and that thrives on insecurity.

These are the biblical roots of Thanksgiving. Judaism has preserved them for all of us, fortunately, much more concretely than Christianity, in the festival of Sukkoth. But these roots belong to all who share in the heritage of Hebraic religion.

Sukkoth, one of the three great festivals of Ancient Israel, occurred early in the fall. It's variously called the feast of booths or the feast of tabernacles. The word sukkoth means booths; and a sukkah is a single booth, constructed out of sticks and vines in the open air.

Recent scholarship has pretty much established that this great fall festival had its roots, for Israel, in the wilderness period. Which meant that the festival was closely tied to the events of deliverance and law-giving, at the Reed Sea and . Sinai.

In those days, in the wilderness, there was a clarity about Israel's identity, who Israel was, that has served as an inspiration and a challenge ever since. The people lived a very simple nomadic life in tents They were sojourners wherever they went, a band of ex-slaves struggling for survival and justice in a hostile world.

To recall a later image, they were a pilgrim people. They had left the flesh-pots of Egypt behind, and were on their way to freedom and justice in the promised land. So they lived in tents, or according to later traditions, in booths. They had neither the resources nor the time to build fortifications and things like bank vaults They were a sojourner people on their way to Canaan, with the Lord their God, with the Lord our God, going before them, preparing the way.

IV

Things got muddled, however, when they arrived in Canaan. Although their i great festivals all recalled the people's origins in poverty and oppression, ' and although the prophets in particular kept reminding the people of God's will for justice for the poor and the oppressed everywhere, the people of Israel began to be attached to the material blessings of Canaan. Sound familiar?

To use that fine pun that I try to smuggle into just about every discussion of ' the Hebrew Bible: the people turned from prophets, to profits.

Pun or no, the people began to take it all for granted: to assume that the earth belonged to them, that the land was theirs. They even began to amass wealth, or some of them did, and lie around idly, languishing, like the famous cows of Bashan in their gloriously green pastures, often at the expense of the poor in the land.

The same thing, more or less, happened to our pilgrim forebears. The first Thanksgiving, as best as we can tell, was manna from heaven. A struggling community of political refugees -- the draft-evaders of yesteryear — found themselves bles$d by gifts in a strange and hostile land, given to them by the people who had lived there for centuries, and who had befriended them when they arrived, sick and ignorant of the ways of the wilderness.

But it wasn't very long at all before those self-same refugees had concluded that the land was their land, that they deserved it as a matter of fact, because they were so progressive and efficient and civilized, and so on. They worked hard, very hard, after all, and didn't they really have the right, to take as much of the land as they wanted, and to push away or eliminate any red-skinned bodies that stood in their way?

All too soon, a refugeee people who had huddled together on a little bark called the Mayflower, in the open seas, like Israel in the wilderness, turned to building forts to protect what they now thought of as their property.

In contrast to all this, the biblical festival of Thanksgiving, the festival of booths, proclaims that the earth is the Lord's! Think of that. The earth is the Lord's. It's not ours. In a very deep sense, indeed, our modern notion of private property is a heresy. When we consider the hunger and the poverty of the world, indeed, perhaps we should say that the modern notion of private property is a blasphemy. For the earth is the Lord's, not ours. The earth and its fruits, according to the holy law of God, are for all God's children, not just for a few.

That's why the biblical festival of Thanksgiving is celebrated in flimsy booths in the open, not in bank vaults or places like that. As Jews and Christians, who take our heritage seriously, as Americans also who take our history seriously, we are a pilgrim people, a nation of sojourners on somebody else's land. The earth is the Lord's.

"You shall dwell in booths for seven days ...," says the Word of God, "that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

V

What does all this mean for our Thanksgiving celebration tomorrow?

Obviously -- as all of us here tonight know so well — it means that Thanksgiving isn't intended to be an orgy of affluence. It's not supposed to be a flaunting of our own wealth and security and property, a kind of lost weekend for weight watchers. Thanksgiving isn't intended to be a day for rummaging gleefully through our so called assets, as I did the other day in the booth in the bank. It's not supposed to be a day for Milowing around in our wealth, singing this land is our land, this land is my land.

No! this land is not my land. This land is not your land. This land is the Lord's.

But — if our Thanksgiving festival isn't intended biblically as an orgy of affluence, neither is it intended as a kind of Divine guilt trip. You and I have to hear this very clearly. I suppose that this is the misinterpretation of Thanksgiving that most of us here tonight will be prone to, if we're prone to any at all: secretly or openly thinking of Thanksgiving as a guilt trip.

If we're true to our heritage, we'll remember that Thanksgiving is supposed to be a festival. In ancient Israel, as a matter of fact, the people apparently partied all night long for several days! They sang and they danced and they ate, full of joy, celebrating the blessings that God had given them, deliverance at the Exodus, direction at Sinai, the fruits of the earth in Canaan.

So God doesn't begrudge us our festival. God doesn't lay this heavy guilt trip on us this Thanksgiving, even though we know that millions around the world are hungry. God doesn't begrudge us this festive pause along the way, as we give thanks for our blessings.

VI

But here comes the rub. Thanksgiving is intended, biblically speaking, as a pause along the way, not just as an end-in-itself. It's intended to be a pilgrimage festival. So, come Friday or Monday, or whenever, you and I — insofar as we take the Bible seriously — will as a matter of course want to get on with it.

Get on with what? Our pilgrimage of sharing. This is what the God of the Bible continually calls us to: not to amass our wealth, not to hoard our wealth in bank vaults, not to build forts to protect equity that wasn't ours in the first place, but to explore every imaginable way to share our wealth with the poor of the earth. For, the wealth we have, in God's eyes is in fact, <Js we say, the commonwealth.

On Friday or Monday, or whenever, we will once again hear the voice of our God telling us about the hungry in the world, calling us to the adventure of self-giving; promising to fill our hearts with joy as we share our wealth with the sojourners and the prisoners and the impoverished; enjoining us, also, to find or to invent new institutions that will allow us to share our wealth systematically and freely with the poor around the globe; reminding us that although we may live in the breadbasket of the world, it's not ours alone -- it belongs to all.

VII

Where do you think that you will most fittingly belong tomorrow? In the private security of some bank booth, or in the public insecurity of that booth of vines in the open spaces?

Where will your heart be tomorrow? Wallowing in your affluence? Wallowing, perhaps, in your guilt about your affluence? Or: celebrating God's blessings to you as a pilgrim?

I believe that with God's inspiration, strong in the knowledge that the Lord our God goes before us, tomorrow can authentically be a joyous festival for all of us, a time of thanksgiving along the way, in our pilgrimage of sharing.

"You shall dwell in booths for seven days ...." says the Lord God, "that your generations may know that I made the people dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" I am the Lord your God." Amen.