

Smoky Mountain Reflections

Thanksgiving

So what are you thankful for???

What did those who started the tradition of thanksgiving as we know it have to be thankful for, and what was a common thread in their thankfulness?

Harvest festivals and celebrations of the bounty of fall are common practices in the history of most cultures. A simple research of fall festivals reveals that Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Hebrews, and Egyptians all had, and some continue to have, celebrations that are tied to thankfulness for the great abundance that usually accompanies the harvest time of year.

But as one examines the history of the American holiday, one finds a thankful spirit when there was little to be thankful for, but much to be hopeful about.

- September 8th 1565: 600 Spanish settlers held a service of thanksgiving in Saint Augustine, Florida, after surviving months of pain, suffering, and uncertainty crossing the Atlantic. They were not thankful for their pain and suffering but for their deliverance from it and the hope of what lay ahead.

- December 4th 1619: 38 English settlers celebrated “a day of thanksgiving to almighty God,” a day to be kept holy by their charter. Even though that settlement later became part of a plantation, a day of thanksgiving is still celebrated on December 4th at that location. These cold, hungry, unsuccessful settlers just north of Yorktown had little to be thankful for; but that did not stop them from being thankful—not for their hardships, but for their deliverance from them and hope of what lay ahead.

- Fall 1620: The suffering pilgrims of Plymouth, Massachusetts, survived due to the kindness of the Wampanoag Indians. They celebrated the first thanksgiving that is the root of our holiday in the fall of 1621. These suffering settlers who lost many loved ones in that first winter had little to be thankful for; but that did not stop them from being thankful, hard-working stewards who by 1623 had a very bountiful festival.

- November 26th 1789: The first national day of public thanksgiving and prayer was celebrated, after having been declared by our first president in October of that year. This young nation was not lamenting the losses due to starvation and freezing and war that were suffered by many in the colonies throughout the Revolutionary War. These bold patriots could have focused on their losses and found they had little to be thankful for, but they pressed on with thankful hearts, working hard to build a new country.

- October 3, 1863: President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation calling for the observance of the fourth Thursday of November as a national holiday. This first Thanksgiving came in the midst of our nation’s only and most bloody civil war. Were we thankful that brother was killing brother and neighbor was killing neighbor? Of course not! Lincoln’s proclamation shows that just as God’s word says, we can and should give thanks in every circumstance, no matter how dark or bleak.

- November 1942 was the first time Thanksgiving was celebrated as a federal holiday designated by an Act of Congress. Again, our nation was in the middle of a world war. Did Americans grieve over the loss of hundreds of thousand of their countrymen? Yes, but they also celebrated Thanksgiving—sharing food, family, and fellowship, and thanking God for His generosity.

• November 2015: and onward over 450 years after that first thanksgiving in Saint Augustine, Florida, we have a chance to worship and celebrate. The evening before, on Wednesday we have a Thanksgiving service. And on Thanksgiving Day whether your favorite thing is sleeping in, parades, pumpkin pie, turkey, football, anticipation over black Friday... whatever your favorite thing is about this day... please remember this: all that you have and all that you are that is good, is a gift from God. All that is less than good is a corruption of that gift, made so by sin. Take time to thank Him for all that is good in your life. Take time to thank Him for the pain and suffering in your life that you learn and grow through. Take time to thank the Creator of all that is for sending His Son to die on a cross purchasing for you peace and love in the present and assurance of peace and love in eternity.

That is the common thread of thankfulness that permeates the history of thanksgiving. This is what all who came before us had to be thankful for in the face of their trials and tribulations. That, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is what we all have to be thankful for.

In Christ,
Pastor Portier