

Thanksgiving Thoughts

Thanksgiving Eve 2007 | All Three Readings

In our Gospel reading tonight,
we heard Jesus say something kinda strange:

*For it is on [the Son of Man] that
God the Father has set his seal.*

John 6:27

In those days, to say that someone has
'set their seal' on something or someone
would be to bestow a formal mark of identification
on that item or person.

Nowadays, we might engrave our name on something
to help recover it if it get stolen, or brand a mark on a horse
or cattle to show who owns it.

In ancient days, slaves were branded this way, too.

This verse has stuck with me this week
because in Amber's baptism a few minutes ago
I said to her,

*You've been sealed with the Holy Spirit
and marked with the cross of Christ forever.*

We might say that here at the font,
God 'set his seal' on you, Amber.
If we look closely, we may *not* see
something branded on your forehead.
But if we look closely, I imagine we *will* see that
there's something different about you after tonight.
For there is a new light now that shines in your life
as a result of some water and our prayers and the Word of God.

When Jesus said this in John's Gospel,
he was speaking about himself.
He was proclaiming something important about his identity
and his mission and what he was doing for the people.
Unlike the bread that they might eat at a meal,
or even the bread that God provided the Israelites
during the Exodus after their release from slavery in Egypt,
Jesus is the true bread from heaven;
the one who gives eternal life, not just a full stomach.

When we say that God has set his seal on Amber through her baptism, we're saying something important about her identity and her mission, too.

Now, she's a child of God.

She's still Amber, but she's so much more.

Now, she's called to grow in faith to know God, and she's called to go in faith to share it with others who need to hear about Jesus.

Having this clear identity is very helpful.

It grounds us when life gets challenging,

and we all know how life can get challenging at times.

It can be challenging at the holidays, particularly,

when Uncle Harry comes and does what Uncle Harry always does when he comes for the holidays.

We'll have 22 around our thanksgiving table tomorrow afternoon, and for this introverted only child, 22 sounds downright scary.

But no matter how many will be around your table tomorrow, life can be very, very challenging sometimes.

In tonight's reading from Deuteronomy we heard a little about Israel's identity.

Israel went through a lot of challenging times as a community.

Slavery, oppression, wars, deportations, exile, occupation, civil war.

Part of the passage is an ancient faith statement

that the Israelites would have recited in their worship services:

*A wandering Aramean was my ancestor;
he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien,
few in number, and there he became a great nation,
mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly
and afflicted us by imposing hard labor on us,
we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors;
the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction,
our toil, and our oppression.*

*The Lord brought us out of Egypt
with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm,
with a terrifying display of power, and
with signs and wonders;
and he brought us into this place and gave us this land,
a land flowing with milk and honey.*

Deuteronomy 25.5-9

Notice what this identity led the people to do:

*So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground
that you, O LORD, have given me.*

*You shall set it down before the LORD your God
and bow down before the LORD your God.*

*Then you, together with the Levites
and the aliens who reside among you,
shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God
has given to you and to your house.*

Deuteronomy 26:10-11

In a word, this identity leads the people to worship!
To give thanks to God for all that God has done for the people.
Our identity as children of God and co-workers with each other in
mission leads us to do the same thing: to worship.

That's what the Apostle Paul is getting at when he says,

*Rejoice in the Lord always;
again I will say, Rejoice!*

Philippians 4.4

Notice what Paul doesn't say: he doesn't say,
"Rejoice when you feel like it." or
"Rejoice when you've got something really special –
like a baptism or a holiday – to think about." or
"Rejoice when you have 22 at dinner."
No, simply "Rejoice in the Lord always."

Our identity as children of God
and coworkers with one another in mission
empowers us to do this, because
we don't focus on ourselves.
Instead, we give thanks for all that God has provided
and will continue to provide. For that is God's promise;
to give us what we need for faith and life.

It's what we pray for when we pray
for 'daily bread' in the Lord's Prayer.

This is how our ancestor in faith, Martin Luther, explains it:

*Daily bread includes everything needed for this life,
such as food and clothing, home and property,*

*work and income, a devoted family,
an orderly community, good government, favorable weather,
peace and health, a good name, and true friends and neighbors.*

Small Catechism

That's a pretty complete 'laundry list' of things
God promises to provide.

When this doesn't happen –
in far away places like Iraq or Bangladesh or Darfur –
or closer to home in Fresno or Clovis or Madera,
it's not because God has changed his mind
and doesn't want to provide these things for us.
It's because the world we live in is filled with brokenness and sin.

Sometimes that brokenness shows up in the world
through geo-political nightmares that never seem to end.
Sometimes that brokenness shows up in the world
and into our lives through the choices and decisions we make.
But sometimes, that brokenness shows up in the world
and into our lives through no fault of our own.
And whether we can point in every situation
to a reason for the brokenness,
our identity grounds us and gives us reason to rejoice
even when the circumstances of our lives aren't happy.

For God offers us everything we need for faith and life.
Do we have the eyes of faith to see it?
The people around Jesus didn't get it.
He'd just fed 5000 people – a tremendous sign
of his power and purpose. And what do the people do?
They ask for a sign so that they might believe who Jesus is! (v.30)
Jesus offers himself to the people; he identifies himself to them
as the bread of life from heaven that would give them eternal life.
And the people ask, in essence, for a loaf of rye bread
so they won't be hungry.

We may look at all we have;
we may gather at our thanksgiving table tomorrow
and give thanks for the food and the family
and the couch on which you'll nap after dinner.
But will we see all that we have simply as a sign
of our own hard work or frugal saving?
Or will we see it as a sign of God's provision to us?