

## Feast or Fast

It was less than a year after the Pilgrims settled at Plymouth. That first dreadful winter had killed nearly half their numbers. Disease, mostly pneumonia, had taken an awful toll. And yet, as the second winter approached, the colony had managed to survive. With a good harvest came the hope for a better life. Still, the Pilgrims faced an unknown future. How to respond?

Instinctively, they knew that some sort of religious act was appropriate. But what kind? Some of the Pilgrims wanted to proclaim a fast – a time of mortification for the sufferings they had undergone at the hands of an angry God. Others wanted to proclaim a feast – a time of thanksgiving for God's blessings in helping them to survive in the wilderness.

We know which side won. Governor William Bradford decreed a three-day feast in 1621 – the first American Thanksgiving. In the face of adversity, the Pilgrims chose to feast rather than fast. Amid afflictions, they chose to thank God for their blessings rather than to focus on their hardships. Feast or fast. The Pilgrims chose feast.

Feast or fast. That, too, is our choice. Some of us may be experiencing enormous pain in our lives, and therefore feasting may be difficult. We have our problems: family breakdowns, tight finances, wayward children, aging and illness, loneliness and depression, the death of loved ones, heartaches and heartbreaks a plenty. And yet, whatever difficulties we may be facing in life, can we still give thanks?

I'm driving at what is at the heart of authentic Christian living. God doesn't need our thanks, but we need to give it. We need to give thanks because, like the Pilgrims, our circumstances confront us with a choice: to feel bitter at our burdens or to give thanks for blessings. How do *we* respond to life? As feast or fast?

This may sound paradoxical, I know, but the only way to surmount the tough times is to view your life as abounding in blessing. You and I – all of us – are so richly blessed, beyond our deserving. God is with us every step of the way. When we know this, when we really know it from the depths of our being, we can't help but give thanks.

President Ronald Reagan once shared a story about a man who had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to him, and the other belonging to the Lord. When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life. This really bothered him, and he questioned the Lord about it.

“Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you’d walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don’t understand why when I needed you most, you would leave me.”

The Lord replied, “My precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”<sup>1</sup>

God is with us all the time, in our living and in our dying, in our ups and our downs, in our successes and our failures, and in all the joys and sorrows of life. Believe that and you can’t help but be thankful.

In our lesson from Philippians we have one of the most remarkable statements in the Bible. Paul, writing from a Roman prison, tells the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice.” Here he is in prison awaiting execution, and yet he tells them to rejoice – to lift their spirits – to be thankful. How could he possibly say such a thing? He goes on to say, “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything...” God is with us always. God never abandons us or forsakes in whatever trials and difficulties come our way. And because God is with us, we can trust him and be thankful, rejoicing in this life knowing that at the end of life is heaven.

When I served as a priest in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a United Church of Christ minister told me the story of a former General Minister (the equivalent of our Presiding Bishop) of the denomination whose name was Bob Moss. He was about to board an airplane for a World Council of Churches meeting in Switzerland when he fainted and collapsed. He was transported to the hospital where he was diagnosed with an aggressive form

of brain cancer. When his pastor came to visit him, he began reading from the Heidelberg Catechism. As he was reading, Bob stopped him and from memory said the next sentences. “In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone.” That faith gave Bob Moss the quiet confidence to face his death in the assurance that God was with him every step of the way.

That is thanksgiving in its deepest form. It is more than thanking God for health and wealth, or even for the freedom we enjoy as Americans. I’m referring to what the Pilgrims knew so well: the thanksgiving of finding yourself forgiven when you have confessed a sin; the thanksgiving of taking a leap of faith and finding God’s arms waiting to catch you; the thanksgiving of finding peace in the middle of turmoil; confirmation amid confusion, and life in the very act of dying.

This is thanksgiving in the deepest and most profound sense: having the quiet assurance that nothing can separate you from the love of God. Know that God loves you always and forever, and the anxieties and uncertainties of this world lose their power to destroy you.

I have seen this time and time again in my ministry. When I served two small churches in upstate New York, I knew a dear couple, Ruth and Richard Leroy. They were happily married for fifty-four years. Then, just days away from open-heart surgery, Richard suffered a massive heart attack. What followed was weeks of uncertainty whether Richard would survive the ordeal.

At first, Ruth felt that she had to hold on to God’s hand tightly to get through the crisis. But there were times when she was so tired, so drained and weary, that she felt she couldn’t hold on any longer.

And just at that point of exhaustion, a revelation came to her. She said she didn’t need to worry about holding God’s hand so tight anymore because God was holding her hand. Even if she let go, God would never let go. It was that quiet assurance of God’s presence that gave Ruth the strength to carry on and to nurse Richard back to health.

To say, “God never let’s go!” – that’s thanksgiving.

Soon after our daughter Allison was born, there was a wonderful movie on television called *Kids Like These*. It was about an average American family who had a child; only this child had Down Syndrome. The hospital scene was a poignant one. When the parents are told that their baby has Down Syndrome, there's the usual shock and grief. Then the suggestion is made that perhaps the parents may want to put their baby in an institution so they can get on with their lives as normally as possible – as if the child had never been born. What would you do? The parents in the film chose to keep their baby.

Heather and I know that struggle. When Allison was born, our doctor, who meant well, gave us a book from the 1950s on people with intellectual and developmental disabilities living in state-run institutions. When we read the book, our hearts sank. We didn't want our daughter to live that way. We knew that God had a plan for our daughter even if we didn't know what that plan was just yet. God had given us this incredible gift, and we weren't about to turn her away. We brought her home, and in January 1986, I baptized her on Epiphany Sunday. After the baptism, I said to the congregation that although I didn't know all the details of her life, I was sure that Allison would be a light to the world. And you know something? She is.

We all have choices in life. We need to make decisions one way or the other. What choices we make largely depend on how we view life – as feast or fast.

I am not minimizing your troubles, but I believe as a Christian there is always a life-giving way – a way of blessing and abundance in which we live in the power of God's love. Believing God cares about us, that God holds us precious in his sight, that God sustains us every moment of our lives is the only sure way to a happy life.

Dr. Thomas Hilton told about a British housekeeper who became quite ill and entered the hospital for treatment. While there, she met and befriended Johnny, a little boy with a terminal illness. One day, Johnny's mother burst into the housekeeper's room with news that Johnny would not survive the day. Would the housekeeper please come and talk to him?

What would you say if you were in that situation? The housekeeper didn't mince words. She sat down and said, "Listen, Johnny. God made you. God loves you. God sent his Son to save you. God wants you to come home with him."

After a moment of silence, Johnny said quietly, “Say it again.” So the housekeeper repeated her words. And with every ounce of sincerity he could muster, little Johnny leaned forward and said, “Tell God, ‘Thank you.’”

Do you see what I mean? Sometimes people who have no business being thankful are! “Tell God, ‘Thank you.’”

The Pilgrims knew the truth of what little Johnny said.  
Do you?

The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi  
November 23, 2025  
Text – Phil. 4:4-9  
Thanksgiving Sunday, C  
Advent Church, Sun City West, AZ

1. Margaret Fishback Powers, a Canadian, is the author of “Footprints” from which President Reagan recited. She wrote this reflection after surviving a second lightning strike.