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Book 1545



A

THANKSGIVING SERMON.

DELIVERED IN WHITEHALL, ILLINOIS.

ON

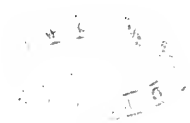
Thursday, December 7th, 1865.

BY

REV. M. L. SCHEHNCK.



PSALMS 126: 3--The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad



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The following Sermon is published at the request of many of the inhabitants of White Hall, before whom it was delivered on the occasion of our National Thanksgiving, 7th December, 1865.

If the Sermon, in its printed form, is made useful beyond the occasion for which it was prepared, the credit will belong to those who called it forth. If, however, it fails to make the impression that attended its delivery, the public will remember that it was listened to under the aroused emotions of the First National Thanksgiving after the war. Nay, our feelings were raised to a high pitch of grateful praise by our excellent Choir, under the charge of Mr. M. Worcester, who gave several selected pieces with peculiar taste and power.

But these, though contributing largely to the effect produced, cannot be printed.

M. L. SCHENCK,

Pastor of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church.

WHITE HALL, ILLINOIS.

THANKSGIVING SERMON.

PSALMS 126: 3—The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad.

During the past five years the position of the minister of the gospel, on occasions like the present, has been one of trial and much difficulty. The public mind has been deeply moved and excited by affairs of national interest; the people he served divided into political parties, each party intensified by love of country, yet alarmed lest the other would sacrifice some principle and thus endanger the stability of our Union, until crimination and recrimination became the order, and political parties assumed the attitude of beligerents. Each watched the other with suspicious jealousy, and feelings became like highly combustible matter that needed but a spark to produce a conflagration. Under such circumstances, and working for the benefit of all, the preacher must ply his office, while he was careful never to forget that the kingdom he sought to build up was not of this world, and that he had nothing to do with the mere politics and policies in the administration of human affairs. Yet it is an essential branch of the ministerial office, to explain and inculcate all the duties which God has enjoined, upon all persons, of every age, relation and connection of life. Among these we are required to “put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates.” Alas! how wide spread and prevalent was the imagination that there is no moral evil in violating the laws of their country. Against this the minister must lift up his voice. “We must submit ourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake.” “There is no power but of God; the powers that be, are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God, and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.” We are under

moral obligations to obey the rulers of the land. To teach thus does not call us into the field of politics. Yet our efforts in this behalf are too often stigmatized as political preaching, as though there was no religion in politics. I confess I have often trembled during the last few years when called to discuss national questions; not because I stood in doubt of my duty, or that I hesitated to perform it, but lest I should be misunderstood, and should provoke a prejudice in some minds, and thus alienate from my ministry those whose souls were precious.

But it is no slight grounds of thanksgiving to God that I entertain no such fears to-day. The storm-cloud has spent its fury and passed over; the atmosphere, no longer charged with electricity, is purified. We meet once more a united people under our so recently blood stained flag, in peace unity and fraternity, to praise and bless our God. "Our mouth is filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing, for the Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad."

I. Let us thank God that we are American citizens and live under a *good government*. Cast your eye over all the governments of the earth, view the foundation, principles, origin, mode of succession, of administration, and the practical workings of each. And when you have made a full and careful survey, you turn to your own; with consciousness of superiority, you exclaim, this is my own, my native land. A government too rigid and absolute culminates in Tyranny, invested in the hands of one or very few, granting exclusive rights and hereditary honors and distinctions, while the great mass are but as the chess men on the board in the hands of the players. A government too weak and lax, degenerates into anarchy, where brute force levels all distinctions, authority ceases, and fortune, ability, character, worth, give no superiority. Between these extremes, our government is happily balanced. It is not a *monarchy*, with all civil power in one

man's hand. It is not an *aristocracy*, which commits power to a nobility or a few rich great men. It is not a *democracy*, where all civil power is lodged in a popular assembly; but it is a mixed government, duly balanced, composed of three branches, the executive, the judiciary, the legislative, all directed by a well digested and written constitution. Here is governmental power to shield us from anarchy, for in its practical workings it is independent of the people. Here, too, are the checks and balances to keep us from Tyranny. All its provisions are made to combine the interests of high and low, of rich and poor, of rulers and subjects; in a word, to promote the good of the whole community. Yet again, governmental power comes not to us by hereditary descent; nor yet by usurpation, where might makes right, but by popular election. But why should I occupy your time to prove what every loyal heart admits. We have a good *government*, for which every heart gives thanks.

II. *We thank God to-day that the wicked Rebellion that so recently sought to subvert and overthrow our good Government has been crushed and its power destroyed.*

All rebellion is not wicked. All revolutions in which the people triumph over and change their rulers, must commence in rebellion. We have a right, in certain cases, to refuse submission to those in authority. "Children should obey their parents; yet there are cases in which they may refuse obedience unto parents, and resist unto blood. Servants should obey their masters; yet there are cases in which servants and slaves justly refuse obedience unto masters, and resist their authority. So between ruler and subject; all submission to human authority is limited. This truth is recognized in our own Declaration of Independence. But fearful is the exercise of this right, for they who do so must assume accountability to God as moral agents for such resistance, and confront the power against which they rebel. "If servants resist their master without reason, they deserve to be punished. If children resist their parents without reason, they deserve to be punished. If subjects rise in opposition to government without reason, they deserve to suffer as criminals."

Try our late rebellion by these principles, and before God and their country they, i. e., the instigators, are not patriots, but rebels, and upon their guilty heads rests all the blood that has been shed for the last four years. They would rule or ruin. In seeking to be masters, they pretended to be Democrats. That party failing them, they abjure their relation thereto, divide its councils, secure its defeat at the polls, and celebrate the election of Lincoln, the opposition candidate, with bonfires and rejoicing at Charleston, while they make it a pretence of grievance. Yea, while they were in power, and held the reigns of the General Government, they used its patronage, its armament, its treasury, to foment the spirit of rebellion, to secure the ordinances of secession, and arm their adherents for the subversion of that Government whose patronage had given them power, whose gentleness had made them great. They would convert the temple of Liberty into a mart for Slaves—make the roll-call of Slavery at the monument of Bunker Hill, the very cradle of Human Liberty.

For two years they presented a front exceeding formidable; nay, they secured victories which made the heart of every lover of his country to be filled with apprehensions. Cast yourselves back to the 4th of July, 1863. Rebellion was then a portentous cloud, a horoscope of fearful auguries. The Mississippi was in her hands. We had not learned to confide in Gen. Grant, who was then bombarding Vicksburgh. To the long list of Generals of the Eastern army, McDowell, McClellan, Pope and Burnside, who had been successively entrusted with the chief command and relieved, was now added that of Gen. Hooker. General Lee, with a large force, was devastating Maryland and Pennsylvania, threatening Harrisburg and Philadelphia, and Gen. Meade, able but untried, was appointed to command. Upon him, as he gave pursuit, the destiny of the nation seemed to hang. These armies were nearing each other at Gettysburgh. This was all we knew when, with heavy hearts, we went up to celebrate the 4th of July. I confess to the sad misgiving that the then memorial day might be the last; that ere another year our constellation of clustered stars might cease to illumine the political heavens, and usurpa-

tion forge for us and clasp upon us the manacles of the slave. While many hearts were thus musing upon the raven with the sable wing, how were we electrified and made jubilant in the praises by the welcome news that Lee was retreating rapidly before the victorious arms of Meade. And when, in a few days, the surrender of Vicksburg was announced, our joy knew no bounds. God had again put a double honor upon the day. And it has been ours to honor these noble chieftains, Grant and Meade, who have from that day stood side by side, laboring without rivalry in a common cause, until they unite with us in rendering praise to God for a conquered peace, a rebellion subdued—a Union and, we trust, fraternity restored. If the glad song of praise ascended to God for the united victories of Gettysburg and Vicksburg, how much more, when to these are added the Peninsular campaign—the victories of Thomas and of Sheridan—the triumphant march of Sherman—the capture of Petersburg—the evacuation of Richmond—the surrender of Lee and all the armies of the Confederacy. Truly, while we see our nation come up out of the darkness, chastened by her trials, yet triumphant in victory, we exclaim: “God has done great things for us, whereof we are glad.”

Gladly would I pause here to wreath a chaplet for our citizen soldiery—the guard, the honor of our land. The path they trod shall hereafter become classic ground, traversed by the historian, the novelist and the poet, who will embalm their heart of loyalty, and cause many gems of heroism, intelligent love of country, and true devotion, to live forever in the hearts of a grateful people. We bless God for them. How many died that the living might enjoy civil and religious liberty! Let it be part of our thanksgiving to visit with our sympathies and benefactions, those thus made widows and fatherless, in their afflictions.

And our noble soldiery who return to civil life again to enjoy the fruit of their victories, we bless you in the name of the Lord. May no future act of your life ever tarnish the distinguished honor that you were members of the armies of the Union.

While to our able Generals and to our soldiery we *Grant*

the *Meade* of praise cheerfully and joyously, let us not forget to render a grateful and hearty tribute to one whose character shines with a lustre worthy of the best days of the Republic.

As the days of the Revolution made historic a long list of worthies, but its crowning glory was to produce a Washington, so now the central jewel, the polished diamond, which shines with a brightness all its own, around whom the greatness of others are as gems in the setting, is the character of Abraham Lincoln. Illinois gave him to the nation. God had brought him to the kingdom for such a time as this—enabled him to appreciate his position, and to be equal to every exigency as it arose. With more than Roman firmness he pursued the path of duty, without the rashness of enthusiasm or fanaticism; without the hesitancy of doubt or fear. Without policy, and despising intrigue, he counseled only of right, and pursued the path of integrity. What could policy accomplish when sailing amid breakers upon an unknown sea? How soon would fanaticism, by dividing the North, have wrecked us upon the very rocks we strove to shun? or hesitation and delay have stranded us upon an unfriendly shore? Then his cool and intrepid magnanimity raised him above the excitement of angry and impetuous passion. Faithful and uncompromising to the Union and the Constitution, yet was his heart all tenderness, to which revengeful feeling was a stranger. It was his joy to see the second week of April, 1865; to enter the evacuated capital of Rebellion; to know and approve of the generous terms of surrender which Lieutenant General Grant had dictated to General Lee. He knew what that surrender meant—the end of the rebellion, the end of civil war, the end of slavery, and the re-establishment of government and law all over the land. It was to him the happiest week of his life.

For nearly one hundred years these United States have stood a national example of human liberty, of free and representative government by the people. In it the oppressed have found a home, the persecuted exile an asylum. God gave our Union to the world as hang in the political heavens a chandelier of stars. With His blessing, they grew in number and

brilliancy ; under the watchful eye of a loyal people and the care of our successive Presidents, the original thirteen became thirty-four, increasing in brightness and magnitude until they were counted as fixed stars. Still, for there are spots upon the sun, under the folds of our flag was found the institution of human slavery, whose light is as the darkness. This, it was hoped, would be mollified, and in time cease ; but, alas ! it was to Liberty as the deadly Upas tree. Under it, and the ambition of its defenders, the stars upon our Southern arm began to pale. As one after another went out by the ordinance of secession, the monarchies of the old world became jubilant, expecting the whole constellation to go out in darkness. And every lover of Liberty trembled to see the sad eclipse. At such an hour Lincoln is called by the people, pledged by solemn oath to maintain the Union and the Constitution. Trusting in God he enters upon the task. Those wandering stars can only be recalled to their orbit by the strong arm of power. He invokes the sword, and terribly it fulfills its office. We may not know the restless solicitude, the weight and responsibility that pressed upon his mind and heart during the four long years of struggle. That he was honest and true, no one can doubt. Patient, persevering, watchful, he lived to see success to crown his efforts, slavery to struggle and perish under his deadly wounds, each star restored to its place, the nation to start again in its career of greatness, and the whole galaxy to shine with unclouded, nay, with tenfold brilliancy in the cause of Human Liberty, to illumine and gladden the down-trodden nations of the earth. There may they abide until, like Bethlehem's star, they become the harbinger of the millennial reign of the Prince of Peace.

When that success was reached on the surrender of the Confederate forces, "how great was the joy ; the people almost ran wild with excitement, men embraced each other in public places, and with uncovered heads reverently acknowledged the hand of God." Yet how terrible was the revulsion of feeling when "the victory that day was turned into mourning unto all the people," as the heavy tidings rolled over the land, that Abraham Lincoln had perished by the hand of an assassin

He lived to accomplish his life's great mission. He died at the zenith of this glory, and by the hand of an enemy for whom he was preparing a Proclamation of Amnesty. While we mourn his death, we bless God for the lesson it teaches. Our form of Government had been tested by many years of prosperity, until we have nothing to fear from the recklessness of liberty. Then followed years of adversity, when treason and rebellion tested her defenses by assailing the unity and existence of the nation. She bides the proof. And now in the death of our Chief Magistrate such are her provisions for succession in office that President Johnson is our leader, and no function of Government suffers by the change. God has taught us to trust not in man whose breath is in his nostrils; to look beyond the instrumentality to the Lord of Hosts. Where are now all those fears that harassed us on the death of Lincoln? Let us learn to have faith in the living God, and remember in hours of deepest gloom "that behind the clouds the heavens are full of stars." Let us, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, remember before God our Chief Magistrate, whose proclamation has called us together this day; that God may give him wisdom to reap the rich harvest that has ripened to us by the war. That he may so act as to reconstruct on right principles, to deepen our attachment to good Government, and make rebellion odious in time to come. Let us remember that he holds not the sword in vain, but is God's minister to execute wrath upon them that do evil. That he is under indispensable obligation to give rebels and traitors a just recompense of reward. Rebellion is a heinous crime, and deserves a severe punishment. While he should be lenient towards many, and apportion punishment to guilt, nay, be magnanimous to a fallen foe, yet the general good of society requires him to make example of some, at least, of the more bold and malignant enemies of Government, lest tender mercy to an enemy, may prove cruelty to virtuous and peaceable subjects.

Let us pray, too, that God may give the South wisdom and grace to submit to their altered circumstances. The immediate effect of emancipation upon both master and slave

will be severe. Nay, few present stronger claims upon our sympathy, our charity, and our benevolence. O! that our Congress this week assembled may, under God, legislate wisely for the common good. To them will belong the high honor of legislating for the whole Union, without a rival and opposing Congress; to show their generosity, in welcoming the return of our erring Southern brethren, and in facilitating such return by enactments that breathe a love of country broad as our national domain, a lofty patriotism that holds "Liberty and Union, One and Inseparable," and which shall invoke from our late convulsion, peace and fraternity.

Upon them, too, it will devolve to declare the Constitution of the United States so amended as to abolish Slavery. This we sought not for, but gladly accept it, as the gift of God. For the last sixty years, because of Slavery, our National Legislation has been by continued compromise. It was this that taxed the giant minds and tested the loyalty of our great men, of Adams, of Benton, and of Clay. To this the noble Webster became a political martyr in his speech on the fugitive Slave bill in 1850. It is this that has produced the disgraceful scenes upon the floor of Congress for the last twenty years. It grew until it culminated, in the great rebellion. With it, the Spirit of Slavery expired, and lies buried in the dishonored and unknown grave of Booth. To reach this day, is a cause of devout thankfulness to all parties in our Land. What sectional animosities will it allay? Slavery can no more force upon us the odious enactment for the rendition of fugitive Slaves. Abolition can no more taunt the lover of the Constitution with the violation of a higher law. She can no longer say "that the only exodus for the American Slave is over the ruins of the American Church and the American Union." Her inflamed speeches can no longer be a fire-brand in all the South. I honor the noble men who, in the past generation, fought for the Union in the spirit of compromise, while I congratulate the Nation that this fruitful cause of discord—this necessity for compromise—has ceased to exist.

In conclusion, think not, my brethren, that among the

great things God has done for us, I could allow you to forget that there are other rich and discriminating favors that lay us under the most endearing obligations to gratitude and praise.

Let us be glad and bless His name, that He has preserved our lives, and health, and social enjoyments, while so many fathers, and mothers, and brothers, and sisters, widows and orphans, have been sorely bereaved by sickness and the sword, of dearest relatives, connections and friends. That emerging from the war, we have witnessed no embarrassment of business or trade. Neither has God "given us our bread by weight, nor our water by measure;" but on the contrary, has caused the earth to bring forth by handfulls, and as winter comes so gently it finds us richly supplied with all the necessaries of life. Let us, then, in worship and gladness, make this day a feast to the Lord.

Does not all nature praise Him? The golden days of Autumn just past, poised between heat and cold, have sung his praises. Ye luxuriant prairies, praise Him who replenishes your lap with never failing crops of herbage, and forests of waving corn. Ye fertile fields, praise Him who enriches your broad plains with ripened harvests, and calls forth the staff of life from your furrows, and thus blesses the labor of the husbandman. And shall man satisfy himself with the gifts of Providence, and say, "I am glad I have got them!" and yet fail to lift up his voice with thanksgiving; and give glory to God in songs of gratitude? "Praise ye the Lord."





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