

Pentecost Last, Proper 29, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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It's hard to believe
that Thanksgiving is almost upon us.
It's just about time
to get the turkey out of the freezer, in the hope that it will sufficiently thaw
by Thursday;
there are pies to be made or bought,
tables to be set,
guests to prepare for
or travel plans to finalize.

And of course,
that inevitable pressure
to plan for the next day as well: Black Friday.
Will we mark up our advertising flyers,
getting up before dawn
to maximise our chances of getting the perfect Christmas gift
at the perfect price?
Or stay clear of the stores
trying to avoid the pressure
to spend more and more and more?

And so we come to church today,
and while Thanksgiving may be on our minds,
this is actually the last day
of the church's year.
Next week, Advent begins;
today is traditionally known
as the Feast of Christ the King,
when we think of Christ
coming in glory
to rule and judge the earth.

Thanksgiving
and Christ the King:
not things that we would normally
put together.

And yet,
here today, we find them linked,

linked by our psalm,
Psalm 100.

Be joyful in the LORD, all you lands; *
serve the LORD with gladness
and come before his presence with a song.

Know this: The LORD himself is God; *
he himself has made us, and we are his;
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving;
go into his courts with praise; *
give thanks to him and call upon his Name.

For the LORD is good;
his mercy is everlasting; *
and his faithfulness endures from age to age.

Or perhaps you know it better from the old hymn,

All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice:
him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell,
come ye before him and rejoice.

Either way,
what we read in this psalm
is a deep connection
between the practice of giving thanks
and the kingly nature of God
who we know
in Christ.

Because what the psalm does
is that it alternates
between the two.
The first and third verses
call on God's people
to come together
and worship,
come together
and give thanks.

The second and fourth
tell us why.

So let's begin there, in verse two.
Know this: The LORD himself is God;
he himself has made us, and we are his;
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

Here is the root of all our life and faith.
God made us,
and we belong to God.

This week
I had the privilege of meeting my new goddaughter
when she was only a day old.
And you know
when you see a newborn
that
while her parents might be the proximate cause of her conception and birth,
this wonderful new life
reflects something beyond human skill and power.
God made her,
just as God made each of us.

And we belong to God.
In part
because God made us.
But also
because God is a shepherd to us.

Often in scripture
the kings of Israel were described as shepherds;
the people were the sheep who belonged to the king shepherd.
And the king-shepherd's job
was to lead their people
and care for them.
Here it is God who is the shepherd,
and by implication the king.

And God as a shepherd,
leads the sheep to safe pastures.
God leads us to places of safety and bounty and peace.
But you know the proverb, you can lead a horse to water

but you can't make him drink.
 Sheep are notoriously contrary.
 One moment
 they are happily following their shepherd, perhaps with a little encouragement from a sheepdog;
 next, one has broken away
 and a whole group follow it.
 You can lead a sheep to grass
 but you can't make him eat.

We are a lot like sheep, aren't we?
 We want God to care for us, to bring us safety and blessing,
 but we're all too prone
 to break away
 or follow someone else who's headed the other direction.
 But we do belong to God, and God loves us.

And, as verse 4 reminds us,
 this God we belong to
 is everlasting,
 and God's blessing and faithfulness
 are everlasting as well.
 God loves us.
 God will not walk out on us.

And so it is that we return to verses 1 and 3.
 Be joyful in the LORD, all you lands; *
 serve the LORD with gladness
 and come before his presence with a song.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving;
 go into his courts with praise; *
 give thanks to him and call upon his Name.

Or as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it,

On your feet now—applaud God!
 Bring a gift of laughter,
 sing yourselves into his presence.

Enter with the password: "Thank you!"
 Make yourselves at home, talking praise.
 Thank him. Worship him.

And that's what we are going to do right now.

Please take out the cards from your bulletins,
and write on them

things that you are thankful to God for.

Things in your life

and things in this church.

We will collect them up,

and they will become

the prayers of the people.