

**Harvest Observance/Day of Thanksgiving (Observed): November 17, 2021****“Thanksgiving Character”**

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The times of Harvest Observance and Thanksgiving often are great reminders of the First Article of the Creed where we confess, *“I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. What does this mean? I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.”*<sup>1</sup>

It is also during this time sports fans get excited. How's your team doing? This question may spark an instant surge of euphoria on the one hand or embarrassment on the other. The fate of our team seems to be often, sadly, irrevocably tied to our feelings. This connection between an external competition and our internal emotions becomes even more immediate and intimate when a friend or family member is on the team. Our hands clap, our hearts pound, and our hopes soar as we focus on the contest. *Their* victory will make *us* winners; *their* defeat will leave *us* losers.

Not only our feelings, but also our very future can hang on how others are faring. A political win for one seat, decrees a win for the true America, whatever that means. A decisive defeat for the military forces of a nation renders every resident of that land-man and woman, young and old-a loser.

We drive our attention to focus on all of these other kinds of competitions and matches to distract us from the real challenge, the unquestionable contest in which you and I, your family, and your friends are already caught up. The consequences could hardly be greater, for this victory-or this defeat- will be final.

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<sup>1</sup> Small Catechism, First Article of the Creed and Meaning

Moses, the servant of God, calls on each of us to confess that we belong to a chosen community that strives and struggles against formidable foes, ***“And you shall make response before the Lord your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. <sup>6</sup> And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. <sup>7</sup> Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup> And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. <sup>9</sup> And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”***<sup>2</sup>

It was the Egyptians versus Israel-the splendor of an ancient and sophisticated culture against the simple descendants of a wandering Aramean, a superpower's economic and military muscle against the meager resources of a community of slaves, an internationally known Egyptian deity versus the tribal God Yahweh. These contrasts did not describe a contest; they constituted a mismatch.

Yet God calls to us as He called to Israel. We are to confess, in the face of the powers and principalities of our age, that we are a pilgrim people. A wandering Aramean, Abraham, is *our* father. Yahweh's victory over Egypt is *our* victory. This victory is of one fabric with that final defeat of all false gods on the cross of Calvary.

The connection between this contest and our character must not be severed. No mother or father could coldly and calmly watch a son's or a daughter's victory. Spontaneously, without thought, the parent jumps up. It's impossible to stay seated. Hands are quick to applaud. Eyes sparkle. Voices are raised in shouts of approval and rejoicing.

Similarly, Christians cannot watch their community, the church, be liberated from slavery and not take part in the celebration. Rather than grow cold, our hearts should explode as we see our family, hopelessly outnumbered, delivered to the service of their great and good God.

But Moses, the pastor of God's people, had shuddered as our brothers and sisters, just freed from Egypt, turned toward the slavery of the golden calf. They had seen so much-the plagues' havoc, the Passover's devastation, the Pharaoh's humiliation.

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 26:5-9



They were eyewitnesses to these mighty miracles, but for all their *seeing*, their *hearts* had remained cold. They had beheld but had not been moved! The minute these miracles ceased, their eyes longed for another god's display. Their attention span was so short and their memory so brief because they had remained spectators. It was their Father, Yahweh, who took the field *for them*.

Only Moses and a slender minority remembered. Only their character was shaped by what their Father had said and done. Yet Moses had pleaded with Yahweh not to obliterate such an offspring. He had led the people through the wilderness for 40 years of purifying.

Now just before his death, just before the occupation of the Holy Land, Moses provides a creed for his people to confess—a creed that molds their character, a creed that keeps them in the family. He ties the external actions of God to the character of this people and urges that they not forsake their true nature. A bit earlier in Deuteronomy the claim is made concisely: "You were shown these things [the Exodus] so that you might know that the Lord is God; besides him there is no other"<sup>3</sup> We need this creed. We need these words from Moses.

Why? Because day after day there are temptations to forget "that the Lord is God; besides him there is no other." And in forgetting this, we literally fall to pieces. No longer is our character rooted in God and this community of His Church; rather it catapults from one impulse to another without continuity or contentment.

This falling into so many pieces that we can no longer put ourselves back together is rooted in another Fall. When Adam forgot God, he very literally fell apart. There was nothing to hold his life together and give him character. As an ancient Rabbi perceptively observed, "When God asked Adam, 'Adam, where are you?' He did not want to know where Adam was. He wanted *Adam to learn where He was*."

The Day of Thanksgiving is a great opportunity for confession. Confess where you stand this day. Confess that you are one with the community that was delivered from the land of Pharaoh. Confess that the victory of God at that time has everything to do with your present position. Your baptism has made you a member of Abraham's family even as circumcision marked your fathers in the faith. Your participation in the body and blood of Christ has joined you with the Old Testament community of sacrificial worship that longed for the definitive sacrifice of the Servant.

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 4:35



Your deliverance from bondage comes from that same "mighty hand and outstretched arm" that made possible the Exodus from Egypt. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses discussed with Jesus the "new Exodus," His suffering and death for all of humanity.

We need this creed. It tells us where we've been. It locates us now. It states where we're going. It places us in a community and gives us character, a holy, set aside character that is not the same as the worlds. It bursts forth in thanks and praise, for not just the earthly gifts of harvest and family, but more so in the body and blood of God Himself spilled upon the cross, poured forth in its entirety for our horns of plenty to overflow from His chalice into our mouths.

Moses' word calls us to celebrate our character. Our character, simply stated, is the woman's Seed, Jesus Christ. Those who longed for the birth of that Seed can sing with joy and rejoice in suffering. It is a character that trusts the Word of promise through many unpromising moments. It is for those who are wanderers and pilgrims of the Most High God here on this earth. They live and plant and harvest, and know with unswerving faith that Abraham's Seed will come.

The life of Christ, His suffering, death, and resurrection, is Israel's new psalm. It was the God-given character of an Israelite girl who first confessed, "*My soul magnifies the Lord,* <sup>47</sup>*and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,* <sup>48</sup>*for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;* <sup>49</sup>*for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.* <sup>50</sup>*And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.* <sup>51</sup>*He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts;* <sup>52</sup>*he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;* <sup>53</sup>*he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.* <sup>54</sup>*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,* <sup>55</sup>*as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.*"<sup>4</sup>

Mary knew her family. She knew her Father. Her lips could not remain silent. *Her* own people were now to be delivered from sin-that source of all defeats-by Abraham's Seed, her own son!

The glory of Moses' confession and of Mary's character is one-Jesus Christ, Mary's son, our Brother, the promised Seed. He has seen our misery, toil and oppression. Even as the Father could not close His ears to the cries of His children Israel, so the Father's Son could not close the womb forever, but came to set Abraham's seed free.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:46-55

He “*emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*  
<sup>8</sup> *And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*”<sup>5</sup>

Christ's coming-His birth, His life, His death, His resurrection-are all *for you*. His decisive victory has made *you* a winner. Your character is based on the consequences of *His* victory. You are forgiven! You are free! You are at peace! You have a Father who loves you. You have a Spirit-filled community that cares for you. As you are in Him, here is your team, “*For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died;*<sup>15</sup> *and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*<sup>16</sup> *From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.*<sup>17</sup> *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*”<sup>6</sup>

As we celebrate Thanksgiving, and the end the Church Year, and prepare to begin a new one, it is helpful to recall that Moses and Mary were not transported to heaven by the woman's Seed, but were invited to follow in His footsteps. Israel faced the Canaanites. Mary faced the cross. We face the contest for our very character.

Are you Egyptians or Canaanites? Are you humanists or secularists? Are you Christians or worldly? Are you, simply stated, of Satan's household with the liar and deceiver as your Father, or are you in the household of God, where you, “*walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,*<sup>2</sup> *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,*<sup>3</sup> *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*<sup>4</sup> *There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—*<sup>5</sup> *one Lord, one faith, one baptism,*<sup>6</sup> *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*”<sup>7</sup>?

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<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:7–8

<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:14–17

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 4:1–6



Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are the Lord's; you are Yahweh's! His cross carries you to victory in the contest. You are confident even in these difficult days, for with St. Paul you, *"rejoice in [y]our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not put [you] to shame, because God's love has been poured into [y]our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to [you]."*<sup>8</sup>

The devil, the world, and your sinful nature will attempt to assassinate your character in many and various ways. Take heart. You who are born in baptismal water, nourished with the body and blood of Christ, and fed on the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, even as you experience afflictions that shake your composure, they cannot uproot your character. Rooted in Word and Sacrament, faith has a sure and certain line that cannot be broken.

Moses' grand creed alerts us, and awakens us, to the victory that is already ours. The Egyptians, the Babylonians, and those who today contest the character of God's redeemed people have already suffered a total rout and categorical defeat. It is finished for them. Victory is yours!

With new and brightened character, let us pray,

"O Lord, of this and all our store

Thou art the Author blest;

Thou keepest watch before our door

While we securely rest.

Our deepest need dost Thou supply

And all that lasts for aye;

Thou leadest to our home on high

When hence we pass away."<sup>9</sup> Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 5:3-5

<sup>9</sup> O Lord, I Sing with Lips and Heart TLH 569:7,9