

Thanksgiving Marshall Reid

Our modern day observance of Thanksgiving can be traced back to the Pilgrims' October 1621 celebration of a successful harvest. Edward Winslow, one of the leaders of the original Plymouth Colony that came to the New World on the Mayflower, wrote this about the first Thanksgiving (presented in the original 17th Century English):

“Our harvest being gotten in, our governour sent foure men on fowling, that so we might after a speciall manner rejoyce together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labours; they foure in one day killed as much fowle, as with a little helpe beside, served the Company almost a weeke, at which time amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Armes, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoyt, with some ninetie men, whom for three dayes we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five Deere, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governour, and upon the Captaine and others. And although it be not always so plentifull, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so farre from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plentie.”

Early Thanksgivings were celebrated as a church observance, not a civil observance. The first Thanksgiving Day designated by the national government of the United States was proclaimed by George Washington in 1789. Here's the first part of his proclamation:

“Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor, and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness. Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks, for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation, for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his providence...”

It wasn't until Abraham Lincoln, however, that Thanksgiving Day became an annual tradition. Each successive President followed his lead, and it finally became a national holiday in 1941. Here are some excerpts from Lincoln's proclamation in 1863:

“The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God.” Speaking of the blessings of the country, he said, *“They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign*

lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.”

I read every Thanksgiving Day Proclamation made by our presidents from Lincoln forward, and I found something very interesting. The earlier presidents were unashamed in making sure everyone knew that our blessings come from the Almighty and that we need to give Him thanks (as you can tell in the excerpts provided). Each Proclamation was full of references to God and Scripture, even going so far as to suggest that everyone read their Bibles! However, the Proclamations of modern day presidents are not as profuse in their praise of Him from whom all blessings flow. And last year’s Proclamation by Obama doesn’t even mention God at all.

My point is that this nation, in its early years, recognized God as being responsible for providing everything that we need and enjoy. They unabashedly ascribed all honor and glory to Him and encouraged others to do the same. As this nation has become more removed from God, the references to God in these Thanksgiving Day Proclamations have also become less frequent. Despite this sad direction of our nation, we still have the responsibility to give God thanks for everything He has done for us. We dare not forget that it is God who makes everything possible, and everything happens according to His will. Regardless of how much or how little we have in comparison with others, if we will put Him first, He will provide. During this season of Thanksgiving, even though our nation may fail to remember, let us not forget that we are not the source of all the blessings we enjoy - God is.