

*Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. <sup>21</sup> The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.*

<sup>22</sup> *“As long as the earth endures,  
seedtime and harvest,  
cold and heat,  
summer and winter,  
day and night  
will never cease.” (Genesis 8:20-22)*

### God Promises to Provide

Where do your groceries come from? Tomorrow is Thanksgiving Day and someone is going to be cooking dinner, right? We husbands will probably benefit from our wives' efforts. Children will certainly be treated by their parents. Some of us will probably celebrate with other family members and that means that the bulk of the work will fall on someone else. But before any potatoes are peeled or any cranberry sauce is opened or any turkey is put in the oven, we have to get all that food from somewhere. Where does it come from? I've often joked that city folk like us think that food comes from Meijer or Kroger. Of course, you all know better. Even in here in the big city, we are totally dependent on farmers. If they don't grow any food, we'll starve. If they don't have a good year, our cost of living will go up dramatically. Agriculture is the bedrock of our economy even today because everybody has to eat every single day. Because that will always be true, God makes promises to us this evening that begin with farming. Through those promises God is really talking about everything that we need in this world. **God promises to provide.**

#### I.

The verses we have before us this evening begin with a sacrifice made by Noah. That, of course, tells us when we are talking about. This was right after the great flood. In response to that sacrifice, God bound himself with a solemn promise. **God promises to provide.** And he does that **because of his grace.**

That sacrifice was part of a thanksgiving celebration. And what a thanksgiving it was! We've all heard the story of the first American Thanksgiving. The pilgrims landed in Plymouth in November. After that horrible first winter in Massachusetts and then the spring and summer living on the leftovers of the food that they had brought in the ship, the first harvest finally came in. The survivors had a feast to thank God. The pilgrims probably had more obvious reasons for giving thanks than we do, since we can run to any 7-11 and get a burrito at any time of the day or night if we're hungry. But the ordeal of the pilgrims pales by comparison to what Noah and his family endured. We usually think of great flood in terms of the famous forty days and forty nights, but that was only the time when it was raining. Now, during those forty days and nights God wiped out all life except for the eight people and the animals on the ark. But what we don't always realize is that Noah and his family spent a full year cramped on that ship, adrift at sea and then run aground on Mt. Ararat. When they finally left the ark, Noah offered a heartfelt sacrifice of thanksgiving to God.

Noah sacrificed some of all the clean animals and clean birds on the ark. Most of us know that God sent the animals into the ark two by two, one male and one female. But like much of the way we remember this story, that's an oversimplification. You see, that's what God did for the unclean animals. God sent in seven of the clean animals, the animals that later God would allow the Jewish people to eat and to use for worship. So there was one extra of every kind of clean animal for this sacrifice. And the Hebrew word that Moses uses here refers to a sacrifice in which the whole animal was burned up. Think about the work that Noah and his three sons and their wives had to do for that thanksgiving. A cow, a sheep, a goat, a dove, a chicken and who knows what else all had to be butchered and burned whole for this sacrifice.

Than Moses says, **“The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: ‘Never again will I curse the ground because of man ...’”** The aroma, of course, was the smell of the offering burning up.

Obviously, God has a different view than we do of smells. Tomorrow, if you smell burning meat in your kitchen, it won't be a good sign for the success of your Thanksgiving dinner. But understand, "the pleasing aroma" wasn't really about how it smelled. In fact, it's not a very good translation of the Hebrew word. A better translation would be "a soothing aroma." The point here is that this was a sacrifice for sin. The heart of all Old Testament sacrifices is the idea that God hates sin and he swears that he will punish sinners in hell forever. But in the sacrifice, God's anger is turned away. So God speaks of the sacrifice as having a soothing aroma, an aroma that calms his anger and brings forgiveness.

Why would burning up dead animals have that effect on God? It's not because the Old Testament God is bloodthirsty or primitive or any of the other dumb things that you might hear on the History Channel. The Old Testament bloody sacrifices were all pictures of Christ. God was teaching his people that sin brings death and hell. But in his love, God would send a substitute, someone to stand in for us and take the punishment that we deserve. And because that Savior stood in our place, all God's anger at our sin is gone forever. So when God smelled a soothing aroma, he was looking past the animals that Noah was burning to the sacrifice that Jesus would make on the cross. *And* he was looking into the heart of Noah who trusted that future sacrifice. *And* he was making a promise on the basis of his love.

Because God's love reaches its greatest height in Christ, all the promises God makes are tied to him. They are all fulfilled in him and through him and you can't talk even about his promises to run the world for our good without mentioning Jesus. So on the basis of the cross – thousands of years before Jesus carried that cross – God promised Noah that he would provide for the world through the normal cycle of seasons and weather and agriculture until the Lord returns on Judgment Day.

And because that promise is based on Christ, it is a promise of grace. God didn't say, "Because Noah has been so faithful to me, I will provide for his descendants." God didn't make this promise because he thought that after the flood, we'd do better and we'd learn from our mistakes. No, what he said was, "**Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.**" God made this promise in spite of what we are. Every inclination of our heart is evil from childhood. We are born sinners and from the moment we begin to act on our own, selfishness and deceit and pride rule our actions because they rule our hearts. God never imagined that we would be any better after the flood than we were before it. In fact, this is the exact same reason he gave before the flood for destroying the world! But no matter how much our sin abounds, his grace is always greater.

## II.

So **God promises to provide.** And he does that **in behalf of his people.** This promise is first and foremost a promise to take care of the world. It's what we sometimes call "providence" – the way God takes care of his people. Like so many of his promises, God doesn't limit it only to believers. In our reading from the book of Acts this evening, we heard St. Paul telling unbelievers that God was the source of all the blessings they had in their lives. He pointed to the kinds of things God promised Noah and to the joy they felt as a result. In the ancient world, harvest festivals were some of the most joyous celebrations of the year. When people didn't have refrigerators or freezers or chemical preservatives, it was hard to keep the food they harvested until the next harvest. And of course, they didn't have pesticides or weed killers or modern farming technology so their yields were a fraction of what a farmer gets out of every acre today. It was a lifelong struggle to survive. Yet, they did survive. Year after year, they made it to the harvest. They got married and started lives with hope. They had children and rejoiced in the love of families. All that because God promised that he would maintain the order of the seasons and the cycle of nature until Christ returns.

"**As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.**" That promise is the basis of all human prosperity today. That promise enables an industrial society like ours to expand its economy in ways Noah couldn't have imagined. Today, a tiny fraction of our population works directly in farming. Many more probably work in transporting the produce and selling it in stores and restaurants and so forth. But the majority of us support our families in other ways. All of it comes back to agriculture, but this promise is really a promise to keep the world functioning. In that sense, it applies to having a functioning economy so we can support ourselves. It applies to doctors who can study medical science and determine what rules our bodies follow and how to treat them when they're ill. This promise applies to chemists and pharmacists as they develop drugs that improve our health and extend our lives.

It applies to engineers as they figure out how to work within the world God designed and build cars and buildings and computers and smart phones. It applies to all the ways we work.

Now, by that I don't mean that no business will ever fail or no investment will ever go bad or no technology will ever prove to be unprofitable or even dangerous. All those things can and do happen, just like famines and crop failures can and do happen. But what God was promising here was a universe that will obey the rules he set down. More than that, God was promising to operate that universe for our benefit. He was promising to work behind the things of this life and take care of us. When you go in for surgery, the doctor follows the rules of creation. And God blesses his work and provides a cure or calls you home to heaven. God hides himself behind the world he has created and he works for the good of all people.

But all of that would be meaningless if God didn't do his most important work: providing eternal life. All the blessings of this life are temporary. We will die. The world will end. Every human being will have to face God's judgment. If we waste the love and the care that he gives us here and die without faith in Christ, the horrors of hell will far outlast any blessings we enjoyed here. So God gave us Jesus, the fulfillment of all those Old Testament sacrifices. And every blessing of this life is designed to make unbelievers stop and think about God. God gives them all to prompt a search for his love – a search that can only be fulfilled in Christ. And for us who know Jesus, all those blessings points us back to the greatest blessing of all: our Savior and the life he won for us. Then God comes full circle and he promises us who know him that he will care for us every day of our lives and he will bring us home to heaven. Every blessing you experienced this year is a fulfillment of that promise to give special care to you, because you are his child by faith. And even every hurt and sorrow was a part of that same fulfillment because God will use those things, too, to get you to heaven.

So today and tomorrow, we are celebrating God's love for us in all the blessings of this life. It is fitting for us to do so. Enjoy your Thanksgiving. God wants you to enjoy the food and the fellowship, the love of your family and the contentment of his care. And when you do all that, stop and remember that all that love is just a sampling of his greatest love in Christ. All the joy in this holiday is just a foretaste of the joy of heaven. Give thanks for all that love. Amen.