

THANKSGIVING – THE PROMISE OF NEW LIFE

Happy Thanksgiving! It's wonderful to see so many people here, at this traditional St. Mary's Thanksgiving service. It's truly one of the highlights of the year.

From our first reading, in Deuteronomy: "Moses said to all Israel: For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, ... a land where you will lack nothing. ... But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today."

The people of Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years, and under Moses' leadership they fled for their lives -- through the wilderness, across the Red Sea, seeking a better life, a new life, a life of freedom from slavery and hatred.

It's the eternal human story – from slavery to freedom and new life. Much like the story of our Pilgrim ancestors, who also fled to this country for freedom and new life.

The other day amidst the countless emails asking me for money, there was one that caught my attention. It was from a woman named Mariam Iskajyan, a refugee who came here many years ago as a child seeking that same freedom and new life that the Pilgrims did. She is now a naturalized citizen of the United States. She says she still remembers the welcome she and her family received those first Thanksgivings in America, and she asks that we all join her in pledging to stand against hatred and evil this Thanksgiving.

It may seem strange to talk about hatred and evil and especially a funeral on Thanksgiving, but I want to share with you a story, a true story, about the triumph of love over evil and hatred.

"The dirt was wet because it had been raining the morning of the funeral. The mourners wore boots and picked their way carefully from their cars across the carpet that was laid out alongside the newly dug grave. Isaac Ross was very old, in his 90s certainly. And he had been in excellent health until the morning of his death. His children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren would have wonderful memories of a vibrant, kind,

loving man who enjoyed his life, his friends, family and work. No one could ask more of life than that.

I looked around at the sea of faces who had come to say good-bye to this man. The family was very large and covered all ages. Isaac Ross had had many children, and each of them had had many children. All of them had come to say good-bye. One man, seated in the first row closest to the coffin, looked to be in his mid-60s. His hair was completely white, but his face was marvelously unlined.

Instead of the typical eulogy, he told us this story: "If Isaac Ross had been only a loving husband to my mother and a kind-hearted father to me, it would have been more than we could have asked for.

In 1944, in Auschwitz, a young Polish Jew, Esther Lewandowski, was brutally raped by a Nazi officer. She was 13 years old. What was unusual about this act was that the officer allowed her to live. Indeed, he forced her to come to him several more times until he left suddenly after a few months. He had no idea that the young Jewish girl whose life he neglected to take would have a reminder of his cold-hearted use of her other than painful memories. The reminder was an infant son. Esther's childish figure and the starvation rations in the camp enabled her to hide her pregnancy. Of course, if it had become known, she would have been put to death immediately.

That was in January of 1945. Sometime in March, as the Germans became more and more aware that they were losing the war, Esther was part of a unit of women who were taken to work in a factory near Parsnitz. The truck in which they were riding stopped suddenly when the air raid siren sounded. All the guards ran off and the women escaped. They hid in the countryside on an abandoned farm until they were liberated by the Russians in May. The older women helped Esther through her pregnancy, and they all were sent to a refugee camp together. There Esther's baby was born in September. Esther Lewandowski was now 14 years old.

Isaac Ross also survived the war, after spending time in a camp. At the time of the liberation, he was 25. He had lost a wife and a daughter as well as his parents and two brothers. After the liberation, Isaac arrived in the same refugee camp as Esther. They fell

in love and Isaac became a husband and father once more. What the Nazis had taken from him, he now reclaimed for his own – a family.”

The man went on: “I am Esther’s son by that Nazi officer. But Isaac Ross was my father in every sense that matters. He loved me, nurtured me, and gave me an identity I could cherish. More important, he loved my mother with all his heart.

Esther never had any other children. Perhaps to Isaac, she was only a child herself. She died in his arms when I was 12. My father and I leaned on each other in our grief. I knew that my father’s heart was too big not to find others to love, so when he met Anna four years later, I was glad to see him fulfilled and happy. And at 17 I became big brother to the beginning of Isaac’s third family.

As I stand before you all, he said, our numbers have grown. Isaac had eight children. His grandchildren number 30. And it remains to be seen how many great-grandchildren will come from Isaac’s line. But one thing I do know: I am living proof of one man’s triumph over the most heinous evil that ever walked the earth.

Good-bye, Isaac, my father. We will be your legacy.”

The rain began falling just as Isaac’s son finished speaking. It fell softly at first. The mourners filed by after the coffin was lowered into the grave. They each dropped fistfuls of dirt on the coffin.

One little girl, about 5, was among the last of the family to approach the grave. She approached Isaac’s son, took his hand and said, “Help me, Grandpa.” She picked up a fistful of dirt and turned toward the open grave. I noticed how the brightness of her yellow curls contrasted sharply with the olive green of her coat and hat. She stopped at the side of the grave and looked up at the gray sky. For just a moment, the raindrops mixed with the teardrops on her face, and I suppose on mine too.

And then it struck me: From one seed of evil, a family – a beautiful, loving, thriving family – was growing. A family to celebrate many Thanksgivings together. This little girl and the rest of Isaac Ross’ family represented the ultimate vindication – the victory of love over hate, the victory of life over death – the promise for the future, our new life in Christ.

And that promise of new life is something for all of us to be thankful for, today and every day.

In the words of the great 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican poet and priest, “Lord, you have given us so much, give us one thing more – a thankful heart.”

Thanks be to God.

-- Story adapted from an article by Marsha Arons in *The Witness*, December 1999