

Stammering praise: In good and not-so-good times

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When I was a youngster my parents always took me to community Thanksgiving services. I was an unwilling and unhappy participant. I didn't much like them: there weren't many people there, I didn't know most of those who were, and I surely didn't care for the preaching. "Why do we have to attend these things every year?" My mother answered, "Because of the hymns. They're the best in the book."

She was right, of course. Karl Barth once said that the basic human response to God is not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving. "What else can we say to what God gives us but to stammer praise?" Barth asked. And what better way to stammer than with "Come Ye Thankful People Come," or "We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing" or "Now Thank We All Our God, with Heart and Hand and Voices," which the late Robert McAfee Brown once said is the best all-purpose hymn, suitable for every important occasion—birth, baptism, wedding, ordination or funeral.

Currier and Ives-type portrayals have romanticized that first Thanksgiving, which was actually pretty harrowing. Half of those hearty souls who left Plymouth and sailed to Holland and then crossed the Atlantic to New England died after one year in the new world. All but three families had dug graves in the rocky soil of New England to bury a husband, wife or child. They had brought plants and seeds with them on the Mayflower, along with provisions for the first winter. The barley they planted did very poorly. The peas failed altogether. Starvation was a real possibility.

They were, of course, people of the Bible. They knew about ancient Israel's harvest festival, how Israel, at the end of a successful harvest, thanked God for the bounty of creation—and also for delivering them from their captivity, giving them their freedom as a people.

The Pilgrim fathers and mothers read their own story in light of Israel's story. God is thanked for the harvest, but also for something more, something not actually

dependent on a successful harvest: namely, God's presence and grace and love. The Pilgrims thanked God for enough corn to survive the winter, but they were also thanking God for the guiding presence they had experienced, the strong hand they had felt leading them, and the love that had sustained them. They understood that God is to be thanked and praised in good times and not-so-good times.

One of the saints of our generation, Abraham Joshua Heschel, suffered a heart attack from which he never fully recovered. A friend who visited him in the hospital found him weak and barely able to talk. "Sam," he whispered, "when I regained consciousness, my first feeling was not despair and anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I have lived. . . . I have seen so many miracles."