

Thanksgiving: Substance or Illusion

✖ This past weekend millions ate turkey, traveled hundreds of miles to spend time with their families and showed up at major retailers as early as 5 a.m. As Americans did these things men of the cloth, sociologists and demographers wondered what was on the mind of the average American. Getting the latest, best deal on consumer products certainly got 197 million of us moving through stores, but we ogled and did not buy much. Black Friday sales were only up only .5 percent as Americans went on their traditional day-after-Thanksgiving shopping spree. We know that Wall Street aficionados were worried about the news of the Dubai debt crisis because it is inexplicable and it seems like a harbinger of future problems.

Against this fluid backdrop of concern and financial worry, many people would ask, What's there to be thankful about? Although I am a minister, I avoid preaching in this column; nonetheless the season and the circumstances beg another question in response to the hypothetical question I just posed, How many of us really celebrated the holiday in proper fashion?

Undoubtedly very few people did. Let me explain.

Long before European settlers landed on American shores, Native Americans hosted harvest festivals. What makes our current holiday special is that the Pilgrim colonists, who landed at Plymouth in 1620, and settlers like Captain John Woodlief, who landed at the Berkeley Plantation in Virginia in 1619, gave thanks to the Christian God.

In both cases these weary travelers' celebrations were heartfelt declarations of their Christian faith. At the core of their ritual was an acknowledgement of the faithfulness of

their God. Perhaps the two most important aspects of the day were the spirit of racial reconciliation (between the settlers and the Native Americans) and sincere worship (giving of thanks to God). At Plymouth the cooperation of the Pilgrim governor and King Massasoit of the Native Americans to hold a spiritual, three-day long festival was truly remarkable.

Today both racial reconciliation and worship are desperately needed in this intrinsically American Kennedy-like, glow is fading from the Obama administration. As the mystique of having the first black president is lifting, many Americans seem more skeptical, caustic and accusatory than ever. The race card is being played by both major political parties and fears of racially based reprisals is a major concern of blacks, Hispanics and Muslims.

To make things worse, there seems to be reluctance in the nation to give thanks to God and claim His blessings for the next year. Atheism is celebrated on the *New York Times* best seller's list, along with a judgmental attack on traditional Christian faith. Ironically while all of this is going on, each American, regardless of his religious upbringing, knows that the kind of wisdom needed to right the American ship is not taught at Princeton, Yale or Harvard. Further neither Wall Street nor Capital Hill have men wise enough to solve the economic and social conundrums of our day.

Historian James W. Baker addresses the reason that many folks cannot grasp the spirit of the holiday. He writes, "The reason that we have so many myths associated with Thanksgiving is that it is an invented tradition. It doesn't originate in any one event. It is based on the New England Puritan Thanksgiving, which is a religious Thanksgiving."

As I pondered how badly the nation needs guidance and a spiritual touch from God, I could not help but think that the story of Jonah had a special lesson in it for our nation. Most former Sunday School students recall that Jonah was called to

deliver a tough message to a very ungodly city, Ninevah. Evidently, the city would make any of America's modern cities look like Sunday School classrooms compared to the debauchery and disregard for its fellow man. Their external sins must have been obvious to the prophet who, first of all, did not believe that they could be reached. Second he did not believe that they would ever turn to God. Third he did not believe that they deserved a second chance.

The judgmental prophet Jonah ran from God's call and from an opportunity to turn the spiritually lawless city around. Therefore, the Lord sent a giant fish (which most people believe was a whale) to swallow him. In this incredible story, Jonah remained trapped in a watery prison inside the belly of the fish until he made a vow to give thanksgiving to God and return to his cross-cultural calling as a minister of peace and reconciliation. Like many Christians today, Jonah was afraid to cross the cultural barriers of his day and take the Word of God to a dysfunctional culture. Yet God, ever the persuasive Father, convinced the prophet to respond to Him by allowing the whale to swallow him alive.

Today the nation has been swallowed up by war, economic problems, terrorism, the climate change scare and a host of other concerns that we can describe but cannot solve. Like Jonah, American Christians must decide to humble themselves with true repentance and contrition. We must decide to return to our mission of thankfully serving the living God and faithfully declaring His Word.

Consider these words from the prophet, "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you."

If the Christian church will return to God by holding to the truth revealed in scripture, then God can save the rest of the nation. A critical mass of Bible-believing Christians can restore God's blessings upon this nation—just by the quality

of our lifestyles reverberating throughout the culture. If you are a Christian, will you bring God a song of Thanksgiving today? The Pilgrims had it right – the faithfulness of God is worth a song, a shout, or fasting and prayer followed by a feast within every American homes in the land. Take time to cultivate a thankful heart today... it can truly make a difference!

Harry R. Jackson Jr. is senior pastor of 3,000-member Hope Christian Church in the nation's capital. Jackson, who earned an MBA

from Harvard, is a best-selling author and popular conference speaker.

He leads the High-Impact Leadership Coalition.