

This Thanksgiving, Remember the Values of Faith That Built Our Nation

Today, Thanksgiving conjures images of Pilgrims and Wampanoags, of food and football. The first American Thanksgiving, however, was as much an act of thanks to God in the face of challenges, as a celebration of challenges met.

A year before the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts, English colonists to Virginia established Thanksgiving with their first steps on American soil. As soon as the colonists landed on Dec. 4, 1619, Captain John Woodlief led them in this prayer: "We ordain that this day of our ship's arrival, at the place assigned for plantation, in the land of Virginia, shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of Thanksgiving to Almighty God."

Remembering this first Thanksgiving in Virginia reminds us what America is about. We're a nation born in hope and shaped by prayer, even when faced by an uncertain world where fortune was at its most fickle. Prayer and thanksgiving weren't solely for comforts enjoyed, but for the opportunities for survival and freedom.

Our challenges today may be different in degree than those faced by the Jamestown colonists, but they're not different in kind. Many Americans this year have wondered where their next meal will come from. We have seen illness, economic uncertainty, division and even violence over the past several months. Many have felt our foundational Christian values have been threatened.

Instead of dwelling in hopelessness, however, I'd instead argue that we give thanks—not merely as an act of gratitude, but as a call to forge ahead. As we count our blessings this

Thanksgiving, we should consider the work that lies ahead of us to keep true American values—of family, religious liberty, justice and the right to life—secure in America. The colonists at Jamestown were well acquainted with work. John Smith famously said, “He that shall not work will not eat.” The work ahead of us to provide for our families may be physical, but the work to provide for our country is moral and spiritual.

Our work will again be different in degree, but not in kind. It could take the shape of becoming more involved in local politics. It could be supporting faith-based values in the Georgia runoffs. It could be advocating for the issues you care about, by writing to your Congressman or on behalf of laws that strengthen families, lower the tax burden on small businesses, or protect women and their unborn children.

America began as a voice in the wilderness, and we end 2020 in a new kind of wilderness, facing many unknowns. This Thanksgiving, I encourage Christians to embark on a new “1619 project” by looking backward—to the industriousness, faith and charity that helped the first Americans survive—and by looking forward to how we can make our core values part of our everyday lives, our interactions with our neighbors, our politics and our faith communities. By recommitting ourselves to these traditional American virtues, Americans of faith can continue to be a light in the wilderness.

Puritan Thanksgiving is often used as a symbol for America at peace. But we often forget peace did not come easily, and it had to be realized again and again. The early Americans faced famine, illness, severe weather and conflict with the Native Americans they had broken bread with during that first Thanksgiving. Many Americans strayed from their values in the face of fear, isolation, hunger and suffering. American greatness, like peace, is still something that has to be re-won over and over, and this can only be achieved by staying true to the things we wholeheartedly believe.

We had a record turnout of voters of faith in this past election. I am grateful for that. And I encourage Americans of faith to hold onto that faith, and be grateful for it, as we work to emerge from a pandemic and enter a new era in our country.

There is a reason we are here today. God didn't give up on Jamestown, and America was born. With His blessings, imagine what we can create. {eo}

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