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2 Chronicles 5:10–6:2

Nothing was in the ark except the two tablets which Moses put there at Horeb, when the LORD made a covenant with the children of Israel, when they had come out of Egypt.

¹¹ And it came to pass when the priests came out of the Most Holy Place (for all the priests who were present had sanctified themselves, without keeping to their divisions), ¹² and the Levites who were the singers, all those of Asaph and Heman and Jeduthun, with their sons and their brethren, stood at the east end of the altar, clothed in white linen, having cymbals, stringed instruments and harps, and with them one hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets—¹³ indeed it came to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the LORD, saying:

*“For He is good,
For His mercy endures forever,”*

that the house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud, ¹⁴ so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God.

6 *Then Solomon spoke:*

“The LORD said He would dwell in the dark cloud.

*² I have surely built You an exalted house,
And a place for You to dwell in forever.”*

Trumpets and cymbals.

Our quote today comes from Second Chronicles. A couple of Sundays ago, we noted that the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible were not added until the

1500s, the New Testament in 1551 and the Old Testament in 1571. So, this passage, which spans two Chapters, is actually a continuous passage. The two Chronicles are priestly recollections which interpret the history of the Chosen People. They trace Israel's history from the time of King David until the Babylonian exile, where many of the Israelites were forcibly moved 700 miles east to the heart of Babylon, the powerful colonial empire that had conquered Israel. The Second Book of Chronicles, the one we are looking at today, begins with the construction of the Temple and ends with a decision to rebuild the Temple some four hundred years later. It describes the reign of King Solomon, a period that was very prosperous for the Israelites. An underlying theme of 2nd Chronicles is that the northern portion of Israel, called Judah, was in a downward moral spiral. Despite the efforts of a group of reformers, the Chosen People were degenerating, falling away from the path that God had chosen for them. But 2nd Chronicles is also a story of moral restoration and of eternal salvation for God's people.

Let's set the stage for today's passage. The Temple has been built. Now, the building will be filled with the Lord's presence. The Temple comes to life as the ark – which contains the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses – is installed in the Temple. So, despite the moral challenges that are facing Israel, we

are at a high point, a moment of great celebration and thanksgiving. The writer enthusiastically portrays the massed presence of the priests, the sounds of cymbals, stringed instruments, harps, and singers, along with priests in white robes playing trumpets. What ensues is a service of joyous song. A supernatural cloud fills the Temple. King Solomon, the son of King David, announces the opening of the Temple as a house in which God can live forever. Solomon had the first Temple built – a feat that had been a goal of the long-suffering Israelites for eons.

Many of us – I would guess that all of us – have had moments where something very bad turns into something very good. We've had moments of magnificence, when we've experienced something truly glorious. The birth of a child can be a moment like that. Being told that a cancer is in remission. Signing papers on that first house. There is one moment that for me was astonishing, and it's something I'm sure I'll end up talking about again. It happened when the first of my eyes, my left eye, was repaired.

When I was in high school, the optometrist started having trouble getting a correct prescription for my glasses. I seemed to have some sort of uncorrectable stigmatism. But they were able to get my glasses close enough and I was just fine. The problem continued into college, with it becoming more and more difficult to

find a prescription that would fully correct my vision. As the years went by, my vision continued to degrade. I moved to Colorado when I was twenty-seven to take a job as an assistant professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. By then, I was having very serious problems with my night vision. The red tail and brake lights of cars would scatter into sharp fragments, blocking out much of my field of vision. Then, when I was twenty-eight, an ophthalmologist in town had a hunch. She became the first person to properly diagnose me. She sent me to a specialist in south Denver who had in his office a piece of equipment that, at the time, very few ophthalmologists had. He was able to use this machine to make topographic maps of my eyes – and that sealed the diagnosis.

It's called Keratoconus, which is Latin for cone-shaped corneas. Essentially, as I aged, the collagen in my corneas began to break down. The corneas are the clear outer surface of the eyes. They not only hold the clear, thick ocular fluid in the eyes, they also pre-focus light for the lenses, which are inside the eyes. The problem was that as the collagen in my corneas degraded, my corneas thinned and lost their structural integrity. Since there is more pressure on the cornea in the center of the eye, my weakened corneas were punched out into football, or cone shapes. Thus, Keratoconus, cone-shaped corneas. My corneas also became very irregularly shaped around the surface of the cone. My deformed corneas could no

longer pre-focus light, and so the lenses couldn't do their jobs, and so I couldn't see.

But then, in 2008, I received a donor cornea in my left eye. The very next day, the patch came off my eye. I happen to also be very, very nearsighted, and of course, the donor cornea was beat-up and swollen from having been harvested from a donor, transported, and surgically implanted in my eye. But even with all of that, the moment that patch came off, I could see more than I had seen in years.

Cymbals, stringed instruments, harps, singers, and trumpets! It was magnificent. I was overcome with a huge wave of thankfulness. Only because I was alive in the twenty-first century was I able to see. I remember thinking about all the millions of people who came before me and were not able to get their vision repaired. But it was more than medical science that did it, I knew. It was God. I had been blessed.

With a great blessing comes a great responsibility. I had to honor the person who gave me the cornea by doing my best to keep my eye healthy, and by living in a fashion that indicated that I had deserved that blessing. The restoration of my vision had a lot to do with my decision to retire early from my faculty position and go to a seminary. I had a realization that I had led a life filled with gifts from God. It wasn't so much that I felt guilty, that I needed to pay back some debt. It struck

me that I had an opportunity to show my gratefulness, to turn one beautiful gift into an opportunity to serve God and God's people.

Today, we are here to celebrate Thanksgiving. Most Americans think of it as a purely secular holiday, and in fact, much of America would almost literally revolt if it were publicly pointed out that Thanksgiving began very much as a religious holiday. The first Thanksgiving observance was in Virginia in 1619. English settlers arrived at Berkely Plantation on the James River. The charter of the settlement required that the day of arrival would be commemorated as a day of thanksgiving to God. Most of us are under the impression, however, that the first thanksgiving was two years later, after Pilgrims had arrived on the Mayflower at Plymouth, Massachusetts. Apparently, however, they did not use the word Thanksgiving to note this holiday; it was really just a harvest celebration. But two years later, at the end of a long drought, Governor Bradford called for a religious fast – and the name Thanksgiving was born.

In truth, I have no problem with all Americans, whether they are Christians or not, celebrating Thanksgiving. It's good for us to be thankful for what we have in this country – because we have so much. We are free. We have a democratic government. We have a military and law enforcement that protects us. Yes, there are millions of Americans who do not have the money they need to properly feed

and care for their children. Many Americans have been the victims of bigotry and the growing economic divide between those with great assets and those with very little. But when we compare our situation to that of so many millions – perhaps billions – of people in the world, we are truly blessed. We should all be thankful.

It is true, though, that Christians must be thankful to God. Because we know where all that we have comes from. We don't believe in luck. We don't believe that it is simply our individual efforts that get us the things we have. God made the cornea that was sewn into my left eye in 2008.

Now, I don't want to be corny, but as many pastors have noted before me, the word Thanksgiving does indeed end with the word Giving. It is thanks that gets things started, but it is giving that is the follow-through. It was King David, Solomon's father, who commissioned his son to build the Temple. David declared that it would be Solomon who would be the leader of the Israelites who would finally build the temple in thanks to God. And it was a truly amazing effort. The Israelites poured vast amounts of gold, silver, other precious materials, and the labor of a good chunk of the Israelite population into the effort.

We don't believe in building magnificent structures in the name of God. It's due largely to the vast amount of waste and the use of serfs as virtual slaves in the building of cathedrals in the Middle Ages that caused us to turn our backs on the

construction of magnificent houses of God. Still, we build churches that are meant to honor the name of God and to give thanks for what God has given us. And there is no denying that the Israelites were driven, not by the need to build structures that would lift humans up as near Gods, but by a sincere desire to offer up a gift of thanks in the building of Solomon's Temple.

It's a difficult thing today to give to a church. Life in America has become expensive. But Christianity is struggling and churches that aren't open do not have the opportunity to strengthen the faith of those who are wavering, and they do not have the opportunity to bring the next generation or the completely uninitiated to the service of God. I'd like to ask all of you to consider renewing your commitment to this church. I have been in United Methodist churches where not just virtually everyone is elderly, but literally everyone is elderly. As an older man myself, one of the greatest sources of joy that I get out of this job is sitting down with a group of children each week. Those children are the future of the church.

For some people – like me – it takes something incredible happening to them to make them take action, to see that life it's just about them. It's about them – and God – and the rest of God's people. It took a handful of days for the swelling in my new cornea to go down. When it did, I remember riding in the car, with Wendy driving, noticing the details of the world that I had forgotten. Some of them

were beautiful, like a flock of birds flying overhead. Others weren't so beautiful – like phone and power lines. But it was all such an astonishing gift to see them again. I remember going to church that first Sunday and feeling so connected with those around me.

This church isn't insular. There are numerous efforts here to serve the community. When people come to a church to get food, clothing, or Christmas gifts for their children, when they are aware that it is a church that has provided school supplies and invites them to come and sit down and eat with the congregation, it touches people's lives. We may not get an immediate, dramatic responses where people get down on their knees and hand their lives over to the Lord. But it does have an impact. This church is extremely well-run, wastes nothing, and builds nothing in order to honor itself. This is also an area that is growing, and in the next couple of decades the Fort Collins metropolitan area is going to expand outward, away from the mountains, and arrive on our doorstep. We will be prepared to meet them with the Word of God.

We give – so that many will live - forever.