

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, November 24, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

**PSALM 104:26**

“There go the ships!”

**FOUR LITTLE SHIPS**

Before I get into the sermon proper, I want to remind you that Thanksgiving means, amongst other things, getting your perspective right. Some of you this morning are down in the dumps. You're feeling sorry for yourself, and perhaps you are saying, “What have I to be thankful for?” Well, have you ever thought how much worse things could be for you?

For example, how would you like to receive a letter like this? It was written by a freshman college coed to her parents back home:

Dear Mom and Dad,

Just thought I'd drop you a note to clue you in on my plans. I've fallen in love with a guy called Jim. He quit High School after grade eleven to get married. About a year ago he got a divorce. Now, we've been going steady for two months, and we plan to get married in the Spring. Until then, I decided to move into his apartment. I think I might be pregnant. At any rate, I dropped out of school last week, although I'd like to finish college some time in the future.

On the next page the letter continued:

Mom and Dad,

I just want you to know that everything I've written so far in this letter is false. None of it is true; but, Mom and Dad, it is true that I got a C- in French, and I flunked Math, and I'm going to need some more money to pay for special coaching in all the courses I'm weak in.

Love,  
Sue

To our young people this morning let me say this: when you go off to college, please never write a letter like that to your parents!

So, folks, get your perspective right, and you will be a mighty thankful, grateful person.

I believe the history of the modern world turns on the story of four little ships. They were

not much larger than the lifeboats on a modern luxury liner. Who owned them, where they were launched, what finally became of them -- of all that, we know almost nothing. And yet, such is the irony and the romance of history, that apart from these four little ships, civilization, as we know it, would never have come to pass.

**1. The first ship was used by a group of fishermen on the Sea of Galilee.** One day, as the crowds lined the beach, our Lord stood up in the stern of that ship and preached the life-transforming good news that God is love; that each human being on the face of this earth is held by a love that will not let us go; that the individual, no matter who he or she may be, is of inestimable value to God; that there are limitless divine possibilities in every person's life; that there is a way back to God even from the dark paths of sin; and that if we follow where He would lead us by His Spirit, we could help Him build a new world order founded upon righteousness and compassion, understanding and good will. And some of the people who saw that little ship and the blessed One Who stood in it, young, and bronzed, and godlike, knew that they were face to face with God Himself; for in this young Prince of Glory they saw everything that they knew God to be! He was incarnate Purity, incarnate Truth, and incarnate Love. And they soon came to the conviction that, indeed, life has no meaning apart from Him. What a change that first little ship has made for all mankind!

**2. The second ship became important thirty years later.** It sailed from the port of Troas in Asia Minor over the Aegean Sea to a harbor in Greece. One of the passengers on board was the Apostle Paul, and he was bringing the good news of Jesus Christ from Asia to Europe! He had seen a vision, and heard the voice of a European exclaiming, "Come over and help us!" - and he was answering that summons. And because that little ship carried Paul to Europe, our ancestors heard the Gospel. And for that very reason, that ship has altered forever the history of the Western world. Western culture as we know it is unthinkable without it.

**3. The third ship sailed fourteen centuries later, and in a month or two we will be celebrating the 500th anniversary of that voyage.** It left a quiet harbor in Spain in search of a new passage to India. It tumbled through angry and uncharted seas. It was a grueling and fearsome journey during which ill health plagued the voyagers, and mutiny broke out. But at last Columbus dropped anchor in the harbor of San Salvador, and the New World was discovered. That little ship opened the gates to a new continent, and because of it a new era was born.

**4. The fourth ship sailed 140 years later from a port in the south of England.** It was not until a few years ago when I walked through her replica in Plymouth, Massachusetts, that I realized how pathetically small she really was — 90 feet long, with a 26-foot beam, and all of 180 tons! She carried 102 passengers and crew, and for 66 days fought her way through mounting storms until driven far north of her originally planned course. At last, when the food supplies were either exhausted or spoiled, and the hull waterlogged, she dropped anchor in the harbor of Provincetown, Massachusetts, 98 days after leaving Southampton, England. And on December 26, 1620, the Mayflower finally reached Plymouth, and the Pilgrims set themselves the almost insuperable task of establishing a settlement where they could worship God according to their conscience, because they had undertaken the voyage in the first place "for the Glory of God and the Advancement of the Christian Faith." So, it was that from that brave handful of God-fearing folk, by the providence of our covenant-keeping God, has come this "one nation,

under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

The Pilgrims were poor. They provided only one tenth of the funds needed to bring them to America. They worked 23 years to pay back the London bankers who were their creditors. They ate the unaccustomed diet of dried fish and ground nuts. Their numbers were decimated by disease and death during that first awful winter of 1621; yet their first act, when they brought in that first harvest of 1621, was to gather together for a day of thanksgiving to God. Today, 1370 years later, we pause to remember them, and to bless God for our rich spiritual heritage, and for the countless blessings God has lavished upon us.

How greatly favored we are in this goodly land of opportunity and of plenty! On Thanksgiving morning when we return home from our united service, we should sit down for ten minutes and quietly count our blessings, naming them one by one. Of course, we couldn't possibly remember, or even recognize them all, but this type of spiritual exercise will at least replenish the wells of thanksgiving and enable us to realize afresh just how privileged and blessed we really are.

Do you know that every hour approximately 12,000 babies are born into the world? On this planet today, there are about one billion children, and three out of every four of them face a life of hunger, fear and loneliness. One of the saddest things I ever read was a newspaper article, over forty years ago, soon after the conclusion of World War II. It was about a school in Nuremberg, Germany, where ten-year-old girls were asked by their teacher to write an essay on the subject, "The most beautiful day in my life." One of these pale-faced little girls wrote, "The most beautiful day of my life was February 17, 1947, when my brother died and I received his shoes and woolen underwear." Who of us could begin to comprehend the agony through which that little girl had lived?

Frederick Denison Maurice, the famous 19th century English theologian and social reformer, in one of his letters, tells of a poor creature in a lunatic asylum who, in a lucid moment, snatched a visitor's arm and exclaimed, "Have you thanked God for your reason today?" and then relapsed into fury. For the common blessings and comforts of life, health of body and strength of mind, food and clothing, warmth and light and air, congenial employment, the peace of home, the sacred ties of love, never to mention our spiritual blessings in Christ -- we are far from being as grateful as we might.

### **HARVEST THANKSGIVING!**

Let me leave four thoughts with you for Thanksgiving 1991:

**1. We ought to thank God even if there were no harvest at all.**

We ought to thank Him for giving us Himself. How wonderful, how amazing, how virtually incredible it is that the God, Who, by the word of His power, created this vast universe, of which our earth is an infinitesimal part, should make Himself known to us by coming to our planet in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ! God's greatest gift to us was "placed in a manger because there was no room for (Him) in the inn" (Luke 2:7).

He lived out life here on this earth for thirty-three years. He knows what it is to be a human being. He knows what it means to suffer, to be misunderstood, and hated, and hounded to death, even the unspeakably cruel death by crucifixion. He took our place on the Cross that we might share with Him a place in heaven. Oh, the wonder, and the glory, of God giving us Himself by giving us Jesus!

The harvest is a material thing, to supply the needs of our bodies. But Jesus is the Bread of life, without Whom we perish eternally. No Thanksgiving is Christian unless it begins and ends by giving thanks for the Savior.

The prophet Habakkuk expresses this truth eloquently when he says,

Though the fig tree does not bud  
and there are no grapes on the vines,  
though the olive crop fails  
and the fields produce no food,  
though there are no sheep in the pen  
and no cattle in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,  
I will be joyful in God my Savior!  
(3:17-19)

## 2. **The harvest never fails the whole world over.**

It is a sobering thing to remember that the earth's entire population is always within twelve months of extinction -- if food crops were to fail universally. But that never happens.

There is an old story in the Bible which says that after the Flood had abated, God promised Noah that never again would He smite the earth as He had done; and then God added these words -

As long as the earth endures,  
seedtime and harvest,  
cold and heat,  
summer and winter,  
day and night  
will never cease.

(Genesis 8:22)

And that promise has been faithfully kept. The harvest has not failed.

You may remind me that sometimes in great countries like India and China, harvest failures result in widespread starvation. But taken the world over, God's promise has held true. If there has been a lack in one part of the world, there has been a superabundance in another. There was famine in Canaan, but there was corn in Egypt. There may be a disastrous harvest in Russia,

but there will be a surplus here in the USA and in Canada, Australia and Argentina. The world as a whole has never been short, even with a burgeoning population that adds sixty million people to the total population of the earth every year. If there has been want and famine in some lands, it has not been because God has failed to supply, but because man, in his folly, has not farmed properly, or distributed the earth's food equitably. Let no one blame God if people starve to death. If the nations would take up the challenging task of distributing the world's food so that no one need go hungry, if they would prosecute this priority task with as much urgency and sacrificial zeal as they wage a major war, then hunger would become a thing of the past.

**3. There are other harvests besides those of the field.** We often fail to remember this.

There is the harvest of the sea. Think of the millions of dollars worth of food taken from the sea every year thanks to the skill, devotion and self-sacrifice of the men of the fishing fleets. Years ago, I preached at a Harvest Thanksgiving service in a Presbyterian church in a seaside town in the North of Ireland. The church was decorated not with flowers and fruit and vegetables and sheaves of oats (as churches in Ireland usually are), but with fishing nets, freshly caught fish, seaweed, and a model lighthouse! Fishermen formed the choir and took up the offering! They were thanking God for their particular harvest.

And there is the harvest that is to be found under the ground — the vast deposits of coal and oil and natural gas, to heat and light our homes, and provide power for the world's industry. And of course, there is locked up in earth's elements, such as uranium, power enough to provide for all our energy needs for countless millenniums to come. We also give God thanks for these blessings, and for the ability He has given us to discover and utilize them.

**4. A spoiled harvest often leads to the lasting enrichment of a nation.**

Canaan suffered famine, and the children of Israel had to migrate to Egypt. But there they were welded into a great nation by the fierce fires of affliction.

Part of the greatness of the United States of America lies in the fact that she has consistently offered a home to countless hosts of splendid people who had experienced famine, poverty, and untold hardship in the lands of their birth. But America opened her doors and her heart to these people who, in turn, have contributed so much to the development of their adopted country.

In the 1840s the potato crops failed in Ireland. My grandfather used to tell me how his grandfather had told him of seeing people lying dead by the roadside, the victims of sheer starvation. Ireland's population between 1840 and 1850 decreased from eight million to four million, as a result of death or emigration. But hundreds of thousands of Ireland's finest sons and daughters, as a result of that awful tragedy, migrated Westward to this new land of hope and promise, to the profound enrichment of the United States. In one year alone 250,000 of them disembarked at the port of Philadelphia.

God, you see, is so great and so good that He can weave even a famine in Canaan and the failure of a potato crop in Ireland into His perfect pattern. God does not create evil, but He can

use it to fulfil His ultimate and all-wise and loving purposes.

So, Harvest Thanksgiving drives us back to that foundational doctrine of Christian theology -- the Sovereignty of God. God rules. He controls the destinies of men and nations. Listen to what the Psalmist proclaims: “The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as King forever” (29:10). “The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against His Anointed One... The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them” (2:2, 4). But that same sovereign God is also the One Who “upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry” (146:7).

Because God is all-powerful, all-loving, and in complete control of everything in His universe, you can trust Him with your life. Perhaps there is someone here this morning who says, “I haven’t much to be thankful for!” Just remember that the One with the print of the nails in His hands can take your disappointments, your frustration, your loneliness, your heartaches, and weave them every one into His perfect design! He sometimes has to break us in order to mold us and make us into the people He wants us to be.

Would you make this your prayer this morning? -

Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way;  
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.  
Mold me and make me after Thy will,  
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way;  
Hold o’er my being absolute sway.  
Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see  
Christ only, always, living in me.

**AMEN.**