

A PROMISED LAND OF POSSIBILITY?

*Script for sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, November 20, 2016 – Thanksgiving Sunday
Higganum Congregational Church – First Congregational Church of Haddam*

Text: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD promised to our ancestors to give us.” When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.



The First of the Fruit of the Ground

Back in the 1980's, when I was pastoring a Congregational church in Standish, Maine, not far from Portland, I started a junior youth program for 5th and 6th graders. This was a bit of a radical idea back then—not all the adults in the church were on board with this program. But it ended up being quite successful. In fact, most of the kids in this group stayed together throughout their high school years.

The focus of our first year was on our Pilgrim heritage. And the highlight of that first year was a trip to visit Plymouth Plantation and the Mayflower II. We organized a pumpkin project to raise money for the trip. One family in the church let us use one of their fields to raise pumpkins. We tended and harvested our crop, and we sold pumpkins and pumpkin pies and pumpkin bread and pumpkin cookies. For a time, it seemed as if there were pumpkins everywhere. It reminded us of a verse the Pilgrims used to sing:

For pottage, and puddings, and custards, and pies

Our pumpkins and parsnips are common supplies.

We have pumpkins at morning and pumpkins at noon;

If it were not for pumpkins, we should soon be undone!

Our youth group visited Plimoth Plantation and the Mayflower II (a replica of the original Mayflower) in the spring of 1982. When we went on board the Mayflower II, I was surprised at how many of the kids started to feel seasick after being on board the ship for only a few minutes. The vessel was tied up at the dock, and the water wasn't the least bit rough. But I think it was the combination of the cramped quarters below decks and a gentle, almost imperceptible rolling motion that made many in the group quite uncomfortable.

To have such an experience is to have only a small taste of what it might have been like for those 102 men, women and children who sailed across the North Atlantic in the fall of 1620. In his *History of Plimoth Plantation*, written about 25 years later, Gov. William Bradford remembered that “many were afflicted with sea-sickness,” even during the good weather which marked the beginning of their voyage. “After they had enjoyed faire winds and weather for a season, they were incountred many times with crosse winds, and mette with many fierce storms,” some of which threatened to tear the ship apart. Finally, “after long beating at sea they fell with that land which is called Cape Cod.” Their voyage had taken them from September 6 to November 11.

Gov. Bradford wrote that when the Pilgrims had “arrived in a good harbor and [been] brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees & blessed ye God of heaven, who had brought them over ye vast & furious ocean, and delivered them from all ye periles & miseries thereof, againe to set ther feete on ye firme and stable earth, their proper elemente.”

When Gov. Bradford wrote his *History*, from the vantage point of a quarter century later, he looked back with amazement and gratitude on those early days. On the one side, the Pilgrims faced the cold, forbidding, and uninviting wilderness, populated by people of whom they had reason to be afraid. On the other side, they faced the “vast and furious ocean,” and a crew of sailors who

had regularly cursed them during their voyage and were now threatening to sail back to England and leave them to their own devices.

In view of all the hardships facing the Pilgrims, wrote Gov. Bradford, “What could now sustaine them but ye spirite of God & his grace?” And he continued, in a memorable paraphrase of verses drawn from the twenty-sixth chapter of Deuteronomy and Psalm 107:

“May not & ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: ‘Our faithers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto ye Lord, and he heard their voice, and looked on their adversitie, &c. Let them therefore praise ye Lord, because he is good, & his mercies endure for ever. Yea, let them which have been redeemed of ye Lord, shew how he hath delivered them from ye hand of ye oppressour.”¹

By paraphrasing scripture in this way, Gov. Bradford showed how strongly the Pilgrims identified themselves with their spiritual ancestors, the Hebrews who escaped from oppression in Egypt and settled in a land flowing with milk and honey. To be sure, Cape Cod in November 1620 didn’t much look like the Promised Land; but within a few years, by dint of hard labor and much guidance from Squanto and other native Americans, the Pilgrims learned how to sustain themselves on the land, and they began to enjoy a time of prosperity and security.

From their time of oppression by the Church of England, from their life as refugees and exiles in the Netherlands, from their stormy voyage across the north Atlantic, from their arrival as immigrants in what later became known as Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Pilgrims had come to know what the book of Exodus describes as the “heart of a stranger” (23:9).

Our Pilgrim ancestors had been strangers in England and sojourners in the Netherlands and on the Mayflower, just as the Hebrews had been strangers in Egypt and sojourners in the wilderness. And when they were blessed with prosperity and security in Plymouth Colony, they did not forget the adversity of those early years.

These strangers and sojourners learned in their own experience that they were “sustained by the Spirit of God and [God’s] grace.” On bright days and on bleak days, they could trust that God would hear their voice and look on their prosperity (when they would give thanks) and their adversity (when they would cry for deliverance).

For many years, I have loved the stories told in these texts of deliverance from oppression, of struggle and survival during times of deprivation, and of gratitude for the overcoming of suffering. I have come to love the Exodus story, and how the basic themes of that story echo again in the story of Jesus, in the narrative of the English Pilgrims, in the African American experience of slavery and its aftermath, even in what I call the “wilderness journey” of the interim time in the life of contemporary congregations.

¹William Bradford, *History of Plimoth Plantation*, pp. 90, 91, 93, 94, 96, 97.

In recent years, however, I have come hear these familiar, favorite texts of mine in a different key. I have come hear them in the somber tones of a minor key, rather than in the bright and triumphal tones of a major key. For I have come to understand that the Exodus story is not only a story of liberation. It is also a story of conquest and colonization.

When the people of Israel left the wilderness and entered the promised land, it was not a peaceful entry. Moses passed on the mantle of leadership to Joshua, and Joshua “led the Israelites into Canaan and established the Twelve Tribes of Israel in the Promised Land by means of a long and utterly ruthless military campaign.”²

Even though the English Pilgrims lived for a time in peace with the Wampanoag tribe in what is now Massachusetts, other European immigrants took away the land, the livelihood, and the lives of native peoples. And they often justified this conquest through their conviction that Christianity was superior to the religious beliefs and practices of the people being conquered. Similarly, the Dutch who colonized South Africa and the British who colonized Australia took away the land, the livelihood, and the lives of the native peoples who had lived there for thousands of years.

In these, and other, incarnations of the Exodus story, one people’s thanksgiving is purchased at the cost of another people’s suffering—often with religious, or pseudo-religious—justification. One people’s sense of superiority helps them to disregard or disrespect the sadness and suffering of those they consider to be inferior.

I don’t know whether the English Pilgrims who settled at Plymouth Plantation believed themselves to be superior to the native peoples they encountered. I do know that these immigrants were deeply grateful for the help and guidance they received from the Wampanoag and other native Americans. Gov. Bradford referred to Squanto as a “spetiall instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation.”

I conclude this morning with words of President Barack Obama, from his Thanksgiving proclamation, a presidential custom that dates back to President Abraham’s first Thanksgiving Day proclamation, in 1863, in the midst of the Civil War. Here are a few of President Obama’s words from his most recent Thanksgiving Proclamation:

“In the same spirit of togetherness and thanksgiving that inspired the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag, we pay tribute [on Thanksgiving] to people of every background and belief who contribute in their own unique ways to our country’s story. Each of us brings our own traditions, cultures, and recipes to this quintessential American holiday—whether around dinner tables, in soup kitchens, or at home cheering on our favorite sports teams—but we are all united in appreciation of the bounty of our Nation.... Together, we can secure our founding ideals as the birthright of all future generations of Americans.”³

² Karen Armstrong, *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today’s World*, 8.

³<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/20/presidential-proclamation-thanksgiving-day-2015>