

THANKSGIVING SUNDAY

*Sermon Prepared by the Rev. Douglas Clark, November 22, 2015
Higganum Congregational Church, 9:00 a.m.
First Congregational Church, 10:30 a.m.*

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 swore 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.



According to my brother Gordon, there's a possibility that he and I are descended from someone who came over on the *Mayflower* in 1620. That ancestor would be Myles Standish. Myles Standish, you may recall, was not himself a Pilgrim, but rather a mercenary hired by the Pilgrims to protect them from the native people who might be "readier to fill their sides full of arrows than otherwise," as William Bradford wrote in his *History of Plimoth Plantation*.¹

A number of years ago, I took a youth group from Standish, Maine, to visit Plimoth Plantation in Massachusetts, which is a replica of the original Plymouth Colony as it would have looked in 1627. We got to see Myles Standish in action, drilling the Pilgrims in the use of firearms. He struck me as a nasty little man who was highly impatient with the Pilgrims' lack of combat readiness—or at least that was the impression given by the actor who portrayed Myles Standish. (Which is to say that if Gordon and I are not descended from Myles Standish, that's OK with me.)

The English migrants and the Wampanoag had good reason to fear each other. Shortly before the Pilgrims' arrival in 1620, an unknown Englishman had massacred a number of Wampanoag Indians whom he had taken on board his ship. Three years previous to this, some French sailors who were washed ashore on Cape Cod after a shipwreck were massacred by Indians, for what reason we do not know.

"When the Wampanoag watched the *Mayflower's* passengers come ashore at Patuxet, they did not see them as a threat. The Wampanoag had seen many ships before....They had seen traders and fishermen, but they had not seen women and children before. In the Wampanoag ways, they never would have brought their women and children into harm. So, they saw [these migrants] as a peaceful people for that reason."²

"The English [did not have any contact with] the Wampanoag that first winter at all." They only "saw shadows," according to one historian. "Samoset, a Monhegan from Maine, came to the village on March 16, 1621. The next day, he returned with Tisquantum (Squanto), a Wampanoag [who spoke fluent English and] befriended and helped the English that spring, showing them how to plant corn, fish, and gather berries and nuts. That March, the Pilgrims entered into a treaty of mutual protection with Ousamequin (Massasoit), the Pokanoket Wampanoag leader."

Gov. Bradford discerned signs of God's activity in the migrants' March encounter with Samoset and Squanto and Massasoit. He described Squanto as a "spetiall instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation." He voiced the Pilgrims' indebtedness to the "powerful hand of the Lord which did protect them" and enable them, for a time at least, to live in peace with the

¹ William Bradford, *History of Plimoth Plantation*, 95.
²Ibid.

people on whose land they had established their colony.³ (In some ways, the Pilgrims got along better with the Wampanoag than they did with the rough-hewn English crew of the Mayflower.)

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 had faced the cold, forbidding, and uninviting wilderness, populated by people of whom they had reason to be afraid. On the other side, they had 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 these English migrants, wrote Gov. Bradford, “What could now sustaine them but ye spirite of God & his grace?”⁴ 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 fathers 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.”⁵

By paraphrasing scripture in this way, Gov. Bradford showed how strongly the English migrants identified themselves with their spiritual ancestors, the children of Israel who escaped from oppression in Egypt and settled in a land flowing with milk and honey. To be sure, those first few months in Patuxet hardly resembled the Promised Land; but within a few years, by dint of their own labor and much guidance and help from Squanto and other Wampanoag, the Pilgrims learned how to sustain themselves on the land, and they were able enjoy times of prosperity and security.

It wasn't only the Pilgrims who viewed their journey to these shores through the lens of the biblical Exodus narrative. Many of our Puritan forebears in Massachusetts and Connecticut viewed their history through this same lens. The Rev. Everett E. Lewis, who was pastor of the First Congregational Church here in Haddam from 1871 to 1924, began his 1876 “Historical Sketch” with a reference to a verse in the book of Exodus:

“After a signal manifestation of the Divine favor to Israel, which it was very desirable for the people to always hold in grateful remembrance, God said to Moses, Exodus 17th chapter and 14th verse: 'Write this for a memorial in a book.'" Rev. Lewis applied this verse to his own “historical sketch,” in which he noted that “it is also of importance to preserve the history of our New England churches.”

³Bradford, 116.

⁴Ibid., 96.

⁵Ibid., 96-97.

I first encountered William Bradford's *Of Plimoth Plantation* when I was serving as pastor of the Williamstown Congregational Parish in the late 1970's. Since that first encounter, I have continued to learn more about both the Exodus narrative and the impact of European explorers and migrants on the native peoples of the Americas. And I have come to recognize that the Exodus story is not only a story of liberation. The Exodus narrative is also a narrative of conquest. In the Americas, as lived and interpreted by European migrants and explorers and traders, the Exodus story has often become a story of colonization and slavery and genocide.

The biblical book of Joshua is a narrative of conquest. According to this narrative, 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."⁶

Even though the English migrants of Plymouth Colony lived for a time in peace with the Wampanoag tribe in what is now Massachusetts, other European immigrants who followed them 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.

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 justification. One people's prosperity is purchased at the cost of another people's poverty. One people's entry into the Promised Land becomes the theft of that land from its indigenous inhabitants. Which leads me to wonder: is there simply not enough room in the promised land of Planet Earth for different groups of people who speak different languages and worship in different ways to live together in peace and freedom and mutual respect?

In his 1967 book *Where Do We Go from Here?*, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote

"Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found this plot for a future story: 'A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together.' This is the great new problem of humankind. We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house' in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace."⁷

⁶Karen Armstrong, *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World*, 8.

⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?*, reprinted in *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 617.

The “great world house” is not a peaceful home these days. We live in troubled, and troubling, times. In today's “great world house,” more than 50 million people have been uprooted from their homes by violence and terrorism and injustice. A cancer that has grown and festered in Syria and Iraq—a cancer calling itself the “Islamic State”—has brought murderous violence to Europe and Africa and fear to many Americans. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian citizens have become refugees. Caught between the brutality of ISIS and the brutality of the Assad regime, these men and women and children have fled their homes and braved dangerous voyages across the Mediterranean in overcrowded inflatable rafts. There's a heart-breaking and heart-warming video making the rounds of social media that shows a group of American and British Christians helping Middle Eastern refugees to land safely in Greece. (You can find this video by Googling “Samaritan's Purse Refugees.”)

None of us is in denial about these deeply disturbing realities of ISIS-sponsored terrorism on the one hand and a rising tide of refugees on the other hand. At the same time, I believe that we can recognize the crucial importance of taking heart in troubled times from our heritage, and of drawing on the best of our heritage, as Christians and as Americans. In the heritage of today's ancient biblical text, and in the teaching of Jesus about welcoming the stranger, and in the narrative of the peaceful 17th century encounter between English migrants and Wampanoag residents, and in the vision of Dr. King, I find hints of a better way, signs that there's enough milk and honey in the promised land for residents and migrants alike.

I've recently met with a growing coalition of congregations and service-based organizations in Middletown that are planning to resettle a refugee family, or families, in Middletown. We are working closely with an experienced and well-regarded refugee resettlement organization in New Haven, known by its acronym IRIS (“Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services”—not to be confused with ISIS!). I'm hoping that our congregations here in Haddam will be partners in this coalition.

It may sound strange to say this, but the rising tide of refugees is not only a global crisis, it is also a local opportunity for people like ourselves to make a huge difference in the life of a family, or families, fleeing unimaginable terror and violence. It is an opportunity for us to practice the biblical mandate to share our bounty with the refugees who will come to reside among us. It is an opportunity for us to welcome Jesus as we welcome the stranger. It is an opportunity for us to help people from a different culture and religion, much as the Wampanoag helped the English migrants in 1621. It is an opportunity for us to create a room of peace in the great world house that is so deeply traumatized by terror and hatred and violence and injustice. Let us not shy away from this opportunity!

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