

November 19, 2017
Sunday Morning Service
Thanksgiving
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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THE PILGRIMS' THANKSGIVING Hebrews 11:13-16

It appears that Thanksgiving became a national holiday in 1864 when President Lincoln proclaimed that the last Thursday of November would be a national day of thanksgiving each year. Somewhere along the line, people concluded that the first actual Thanksgiving Day celebration was in the fall of 1621 when the Pilgrims who survived the first year in the New World celebrated and gave thanks to God.

No doubt there have been many traditions and ideas that flowed from imagining what that first celebration was like. Imaginations have a tendency to blow reality out of proportion. Probably compared to today's excesses, the fare at the Pilgrims' celebration would be considered meager fare indeed.

However, we do read that along with the meal and thanksgiving offered by the leaders of that little band, there was also some kind of entertainment. Was it the first Thanksgiving Day football game? Was it a parade? We can be pretty sure that folks didn't clean up the dirty dishes and then head out to Walmart to get a jump on Christmas shopping.

Today, I would like to spend several minutes reviewing what we know from history, which is not the same story as redacted history. The story of the Pilgrims is so interesting and yet so challenging and convicting. Would any of us have been part of that Separatist group that landed on the shores of what would become the greatest nation on earth? You might conclude, "No," because adventure and pilgrim-kind of stuff just isn't your bag.

But after remembering the sacrifice of Plymouth pilgrims, let's finish our time together today considering the testimony of Scripture

concerning the pilgrims and sojourners who look with the eye of faith to God fulfilling His promise about the eternal city. If you are a follower of Christ, a born again Christian, that is your bag. We, like those ancient pilgrims from England and Holland, are on a journey home because this world is not home to us at all.

They Were Pilgrims.

A brief history of the people. The Pilgrims could not endure the state religion. England was a Roman Catholic nation when, in 1534, Henry VIII broke with the official church and created the new nation church called *The Church of England* of which he was the head. Sadly, the new state church was little changed from the church of Rome. The change in England took place right at the time the Reformation was picking up speed.

Some reformers were satisfied that the Church of England was a viable change and that they could work for purity within the church. These people were called Puritans because they longed for a pure church. Some of the Puritans soon concluded that complete change was impossible in the Church of England. Therefore, they concluded that they needed to break out of the national church altogether and form a church that reflected the truths and practices of the New Testament Church. These people became known as Separatists. The Pilgrims were part of the Separatist group.

Henry VIII and the leaders of the State determined that the Separatists were treasonous in light of their rule that it was illegal to be a part of any church other than the official state church. As a result, the Separatists lived in danger of both persecution and imprisonment. For this reason, a small group of Separatists from the village of Scrooby (in north Nottinghamshire) determined that it was time to leave England. In 1609, these Separatists sailed to Amsterdam, Holland where they stayed briefly, and then on to Leiden where they stayed for about eleven years. They enjoyed religious freedom in Holland and gathered openly for church under the leadership of Pastor John Robinson. Young William Bradford and William Brewster, future leaders of Plymouth Colony, were among the members of the church.

But living in Holland was not conducive to spiritual growth either. The Pilgrims could not endure the worldliness of Holland. They believed that the Dutch culture was too permissive. Later, when William Bradford wrote the history of the Pilgrims he commented on “the great licentiousness of youth” in Holland and lamented the “evil examples” and “manifold temptations of the place.” He wrote,

“Of all the sorrows most heavy to be borne (in Holland), was that many of the children, influenced by these conditions, and the great licentiousness of the young people of the country, and the many temptations of the city, were led by evil example into dangerous courses, getting the reins off their necks and leaving their parents. Some became soldiers, others embarked upon voyages by sea and others upon worse courses tending to dissoluteness and the danger of their souls, to the great grief of the parents and the dishonour of God. So they saw their posterity would be in danger to degenerate and become corrupt.” (William Bradford, *Bradford’s History of the Plymouth Settlement*, p.21)

The parents were greatly concerned that the children were growing up to abandon family, English culture, and God.

Finally, the Pilgrims were determined to find a place where they could serve God freely. Revisionist history claims the Pilgrims came to the New World for financial reasons just like the settlers in Jamestown Colony. It is true that they found work and making a living in Holland difficult because they were immigrants. It is also true that they followed the established legal process for establishing a colony in the New World, that is filing the proper paperwork, getting permissions and grants and such. But that did not make the Pilgrims just another boatload of speculators who wanted to get rich.

It is also true that the congregation in Leiden decided to leave Holland to establish a farming village in the northern part of the Virginia Colony. At that time, Virginia extended from Jamestown in the south all the way to the mouth of the Hudson River in the north. Originally the Pilgrims planned to settle near present-day New York City. That is what their charter or permission called for. In far Northern Virginia they hoped to live under the English government, but they would worship in their own, separate church.

Because the congregation didn’t have enough money on their own to establish their village, they entered into an agreement with financial investors. This was a common practice. The company of investors would provide passage for the colonists and supply them with tools, clothing, and other supplies. The colonists in turn would work for the company, sending natural resources such as fish, timber, and furs back to England. All assets, including the land and the Pilgrims’ houses, would belong to the company until the end of seven years when all of it would be divided among each of the investors and colonists. The colonists and investors had many disagreements, but eventually the Pilgrims were able to leave Europe for America.

All legal and financial matters aside, the people truly did come to America with the desire to serve God freely. As Bradford put it: “They cherished a great hope and inward zeal of laying good foundations, or at least of making some way towards it, for the propagation and advance of the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in the remote parts of the world, even though they should be but stepping stones to others in the performance of so great a work.” (*Bradford’s History of the Plymouth Settlement*, p.21).

The voyage to the New World was only a harbinger of the hardships this pilgrimage held. The entire congregation could not come to America together. Those who could settle their affairs in Leiden went first while the greater number, including their pastor John Robinson, remained behind. The congregation either purchased or rented a small ship, *Speedwell*, to transport them across the sea. At Southampton, a port in England, they were joined by a group of English colonists who had been gathered by the investors. During the week spent at Southampton, the Pilgrims patched the *Speedwell* because it showed signs of leaking.

The *Speedwell* and *Mayflower* (a ship rented by the investors) departed for America three times. Twice they had to turn back to England because the *Speedwell* leaked. Finally they were forced to leave the ship and pack as many travelers as possible on the *Mayflower*. As a result, many families were divided when some passengers had to be turned back for lack of space. A month after leaving England the first time, on September 6, 1620, the *Mayflower* set out alone with 102 passengers.

The Mayflower arrived in New England on November 11, 1620 after a voyage of 66 days. Although the Pilgrims had originally intended to settle near the Hudson River in New York, dangerous currents and poor winds forced the ship to seek shelter at Cape Cod. Because it was so late in the year and travel around Cape Cod was proving difficult, the passengers decided not to sail further but remain near the Cape.

There is an interesting and rather well known story about where the Pilgrims decided to build the colony. Some of the leaders were in a smaller boat looking for a place that would be suitable. It was already late November and a cold, blustery storm was brewing. As it grew dark, the men tried desperately to find a place to land with no success. Suddenly a huge wave caught them and literally threw the boat ashore. It was pitch dark so the men hunkered down until morning. When daylight broke, they discovered that they landed at what had been a large Wampanoag Indian village. A year earlier sickness had wiped out the entire village. It was level, cleared, tillable and there was even some corn left behind. That is where they built Plymouth Colony, believing the Lord had washed them ashore.

Establishing Plymouth Colony also held some challenges. The Pilgrims began to build their town December 16, 1620. Many of the colonists fell ill those first few months. They were probably suffering from scurvy and pneumonia caused by a lack of shelter in the cold, wet weather. For the first few weeks the people lived on the ship and were shuttled back and forth as they built shelters. Although the Pilgrims were not starving, their sea diet was very high in salt, which weakened their bodies on the long journey and during that first winter.

As many as two or three people died each day during their first two months on land. Only 52 people survived the first year in Plymouth. When the Mayflower left Plymouth on April 5, 1621, only half the crew was available to sail her back to England.

Having established the village, the Pilgrims began meeting the neighbors. Although they occasionally caught glimpses of native people, it wasn't until four months after their arrival that the colonists met and communicated with them. In March 1621, they made a treaty of mutual protection with the Wampanoag leader, known as Massasoit to the Pilgrims.

But the key individual was Wampanoag man known as Squanto to the Pilgrims. God had prepared this man for this time. Ten years earlier he had been taken captive by the Spanish. They sold him as a slave to the French. At some point Franciscan Monks liberated Squanto. He became a Christian, traveled to England to learn English then traveled back to Cape Cod to find his village, not knowing that everyone had died while he was in Europe. As God would have it, Squanto ran into the Pilgrims and became their guide, translator, and friend.

That brings us to the foundation of our national holiday. The people offered thanksgiving for God's providential care. God's care is acknowledged in the Mayflower Compact. To prevent anarchy because of lack of governing authority, the Pilgrims chose to establish a government of their own. The Mayflower Compact was based simultaneously upon a majoritarian model (taking into account that women and children could not vote) and the settlers' allegiance to the king. Forty-one adult men signed the compact. These were real men, people like us. As we look at their names, names like ours, we might wonder if you or I would have made such a commitment to serving God?

The Compact was in essence a social contract in which the settlers consented to follow the compact's rules and regulations for the sake of order and survival. A modern rendition reads like this:

In the name of God, Amen. We, whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord King James, by the Grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, King, defender of the Faith, etc.

Having undertaken, for the Glory of God, and advancements of the Christian faith and honor of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the Northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents, solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God, and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic; for our better ordering, and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

In witness whereof we have hereunto subscribed our names at Cape Cod the 11th of November, in the year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord King James, of England, France, and Ireland, the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth, 1620.

The references to God, appeal to God, commitment to God reminds us of the founding documents of this nation. Was that just the thing to do, or did the signers actually have a fear of God, love for God, and desire to serve God? The answer is obvious to all but the spiritually blind who hate God and seek to rewrite history so that it leaves God out.

We end our brief tour with the first Thanksgiving. In the fall of 1621, the colonists marked their first harvest with a three-day celebration. Massasoit and 90 of his men joined the English for feasting and entertainment. How does our thankfulness today compare to that of the Pilgrims?

We Are Pilgrims.

Our text, taken from the great examples of people with faith chapter, reminds us that strangers and exiles die in faith. *These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth* (v.13). But because we are characterized by faith, we gladly receive God's promise.

We Pilgrims delight in the promises of God's Word. But above all else we strain with every fiber of our being to arrive at the promised city, heaven, the presence of God. Okay, we don't strain, but we do think about heaven, right? Like Paul we should be characterized by, *[We] press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 3:14).

Pilgrims trust God's promises, but at the same time we do not receive the "thing" promised in this life. So much like those faithful men and women who have already passed on before us, we die in faith. We die and do not receive the fullness of God's promises in this life.

But that is okay because faith greets what is seen from afar. By faith or through our faith, the heavenly city is very real to us. By faith we know that it has to exist and that we have to enter it, even though

we are not sure what "it" is. Can strangers and exiles be thankful while we travel knowing that we do not receive the promised thing in this life? Can we be thankful while knowing that we are but Pilgrims traveling through this life? We are not settling down yet because we have not reached the shore that is our goal.

We are okay with being strangers in this world. We do not like raising our families in Leiden. We long for freedom to worship God according to His Word. And along the journey, we are trying to tell the good news of salvation to as many people as possible. Modern Pilgrims journeying toward God's city are like Bradford and his people who served God, "... even though they should be but stepping stones to others in the performance of so great a work." And so we keep pressing on through spiritual storms and setbacks and constant change of plans.

We are not interested in going back (vv.14-15). Pilgrims today know that we are on a pilgrimage toward a new homeland. *For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland* (v.14). We have not arrived at the homeland yet. We are still on the boat. Sometimes it feels like our boat if full of salted pork and scurvy. There are dissenters on the boat. Some people seem to be on the boat for all the wrong reasons, as though they plan to become rich in the homeland. But through it all our focus is set on the colony in the New World.

The focus must be forward because if our minds are set on the "old home" we will return to our sin. *If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return* (v.15). Specifically this statement refers to Abraham who could have thought about going back to Ur, but his eyes were on the City of God. The Israelites often wanted to return to Egypt because they had no faith in God. Some Pilgrims stayed in England and Holland. And many professing Christians say they are on the voyage to the better city, but their lives seem to indicate that they like Holland just fine.

This text reminds us of the second verse of the hymn *Higher Ground* written by Johnson Oatman, Jr.

My heart has no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay
Tho' some may dwell where these abound

My prayer, my aim is higher ground.

Thankful people have their eyes on the future (v.16). We desire the heavenly country. *But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.* How often do we think about the *better country*?

Read John's description in the Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more (Revelation 21:1).

"The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son" (Revelation 21:7).

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations (Revelation 21:23-26).

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

Truly born again people, truly desire the better country. Yes, it is the city where we will be free from pain, sorrow, disappointment. The place where we are free from temptation and guilt of sin. But more importantly free to worship God in perfect holiness. No questions, no doubt, no arguments – that worship will be right and proper!

We thank God. *Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.* We know that He delights to be called our God. We know that He has prepared a city. We are but pilgrims headed for the promised New World that God has already built.

The journey can be difficult. The journey can be treacherous. The journey does require sacrifice. Sometimes we must throw overboard what we would like to keep. Sometimes people stay behind we wish would go with us. Often people on the docks call us fools.

But we know by faith that the city God has built for us waits for our residence in the future. What kind of thanksgiving will that be? Our current thanksgiving ought to be a small reflection of that day as we look forward by faith.