

Pilgrim Journey

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Mt 6:25-34

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“1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue.”
Then followed a hundred years of European nations
 engaging in frantic exploration and colonization.
Spain emerged as the leading power of Europe.
The Spanish Empire allied with the Roman Catholic Church
 in conquest of the new world.
Government and Church proved a formidable alliance
 and dissent of any sort was quickly quelled.

In 1492, Columbus stumbled upon North America.
Just 25 years later, 1517,
 Martin Luther nailed to the door of Wittenberg Church
 a summons to debate some of the church’s practices.
With that the Protestant Reformation was unleashed.
Within 50 years 40 percent of Europe assumed some form of Protestant theology.
A thousand years of hegemony by Medieval aristocracy began to crumble.
Yet for its rapid spread, the Protestant movement was unstable.
 Irreconcilable disagreements among Protestants split nations.
Churches divided by politics and prejudice.
Persecutions by Christians upon Christians ravaged society,
 all in the name of Jesus
 and all at fault one way or another.
Society was falling apart.
 Changes overtook adaptation.
Forces from all sides threatened a thousand years of stability,
 albeit stability founded on ignorance and obeisance.
In 1604, James the First authorized a new Bible called The King James Version.
Shakespeare wrote provocative plays like *Hamlet*
 which portrayed the personal problems of kings and princes.
John Donne seduced ladies with his love poems.
Francis Bacon unnerved society with his scientific lectures.
Explorers like Sir Walter Raleigh were favored one moment and beheaded the next.
Society was crumbling and the end times seemed imminent.

Amidst this upheaval and political uncertainty
 emerged a group of believers
 who sought a pure religion *devoid of human arrogance*.
This group of believers was derisively called “Puritans.”
In the eyes of the Puritans,
 the Church of England had become as corrupt and greedy
 as the Catholic and other Protestant churches.
Puritans protested the practices of the Church of England
 and were considered extremists.
The Puritans pursued strict conformity to the laws and teachings of the Bible,
 and highest purity of personal and corporate morality.
The Puritans’ simple and fervent faith
 contrasted with the Church of England’s ostentation and wealth.
The very *existence* of the unpretentious Puritans
 called into question what the Church of England had become.
Therefore, as is always with those who question power,
 the Puritans were labeled traitors.
Life in England became difficult for the Puritans.

They were imprisoned, beaten and their homes confiscated,
solely for practicing a different form of Christianity.

Many were forced to leave England.

A small group of Puritans was called "Pilgrims"
because they began a journey, a pilgrimage,
to find a new homeland where they would have freedom to express their faith.

It was both a journey to *a place* and to *a way of life*.

It was a journey to where they would be allowed to worship
"without the mixture of men's inventions," in the words of William Bradford.

Their journey from England to Holland and then to America
was a journey of persecution, betrayal, danger and poverty.

In the year 1608 they left England to go to Amsterdam.

Because of the Pilgrims' religious convictions,
the ship owners overcharged and swindled them out of money and property.

When they finally were able to hire a ship to take them to Amsterdam,
and had loaded all that remained of their belongings
and were just about to board ship,
the ship owner turned them over to the police.

The Pilgrims were arrested
and the ship owner kept all their property that was already on board.

This act of treachery was one of the many they experienced,
and caused the Pilgrims to believe that if they were to have *any* hope of a new life
it would have to be by divine intervention.

But even in Holland the Pilgrims were in danger.

In 1620, they decided to go to America, to Virginia,
to establish a colony where they could worship in freedom.

Preparations were difficult and frustrating.

The company who owned Virginia demanded a tough contract.

The owner of the ship Mayflower charged a high price.

The owner of the Speedwell sabotaged the ship to get out of a risky contract.

The Pilgrims finally left for America on September 6, 1620.

It was already autumn and the sea turned dangerous.
Storms struck throughout the journey.
Infections and colds spread quickly through cramped ship quarters.
Scurvy afflicted them all.

They sailed for 9 weeks and were blown so far off course
that, instead of in Virginia, they ended up in Massachusetts.

On November 11th they landed,
at the beginning of winter,
without shelter and only the food they packed on ship.

Within three months in America *half* of the Pilgrims died.

But greater than fear of disease and starvation was fear of the Indians.

William Bradford, a leader of the Pilgrims, wrote,
*we shall be in continual danger of the savage people,
who are cruell, barbarous and most treacherous,
being most furious in their rage
and merciless wher they overcome;
not being contente only to kill, & that may be;
fleaing some alive with the shells of fishes,
cutting of the members & joynts of others peesmeale,
and broiling on the coles,
eate the collops of their flesh in their sight whilst they live;*

and other cruelties too horrible to be related.

The Pilgrims imagined the worst of the Indians.
They also realized that their survival depended on peaceful co-existence with them.
So the Pilgrims cautiously sought out the indigenous people
to begin friendly relations.

But they could find no Indians.
Exploring parties found stashes of corn, squash and other food
which they took back to their village.
The Pilgrims also desecrated burial grounds and took items from Indians' homes.
But they found no Indian people.
This was because *previous* settlers in the area had brought with them smallpox.
The disease introduced by Europeans decimated the Indian population around Cape Cod.

It was 4 months after their arrival in America that the Pilgrims saw their first Indian.
A young man, alone, strolled into camp.
At the sight of him men stared aghast,
women flung skirts over their children's eyes,
young boys peeked and girls giggled.
The Indian walked right up to the Pilgrim leaders.
The strictly modest Pilgrims, in the plainest black and white clothes buttoned to the neck,
were startled to see that the young Indian was *buck naked!*
The Pilgrim leaders fumbled around to communicate with gestures and pictures.
The Indian watched them awhile
and then in clear, pure British English, said, "Welcome!"

The young man was Samoset.
He had learned English from fishermen who worked off the coast of Maine.
Samoset introduced them to Squanto
who had traveled in Europe for a year and recently returned.
Squanto introduced them to his chief, Massasoit,
who began a long peaceful relationship with the Pilgrims.
The Indians new well the ways of Europeans,
while the Pilgrims *new nothing* of their new home.
Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to plant and grow corn and survive in the new land.
The Pilgrims finally came to a place
where their neighbors not only tolerated but *welcomed* them,
where they could live and work *and keep* the product of their labors,
where they could worship in freedom.

In 1621, at the end of their first year in America,
after a winter of death and a summer of abundance,
the Pilgrims stopped to give thanks to God.
The Indians, who gave of themselves
and made it possible for the Pilgrims to survive the winter,
gathered with the Pilgrims to celebrate God's goodness
with a feast from God's bounty.
They stopped to give thanks to God
for sparing their lives and giving them a home.
It was the first Thanksgiving.

Today we enjoy immense blessings unimagined by our ancestors,
blessings hard-won through sacrifice and work and risk over generations.
Indigenous peoples, Pilgrims, colonists, patriots, settlers, civil servants and citizens
through centuries of dreaming and building a new nation
have given *to us in this* generation a cornucopia of wealth and freedom.

From starvation of Pilgrims,
 through the deprivation of settlers,
 unto the miracles of agriculture and transportation,
 our store shelves are piled high with food,
 the richness of our land and lands beyond.

From dangers in a wild and unknown place,
 to this day of government, public safety, hospitals,
 police, firefighters, and social agencies,
 we live in safety and freedom from fear.

From persecution for divergent beliefs,
 from vilifying and slander over religious differences,
 to this day when we are free to worship however and wherever we choose,
 to this day when any of us can read and interpret the Bible,
 to this day when we can create a community of believers,
 a church independent of government,
 a band of fellow believers
 who care for one another,
 serve one another,
 live for one another
 because of our trust in the love of Jesus,
 we can hope and be confident in our future.

Now, 390 years after that first Thanksgiving,
 we also now stop this day to give thanks to God
 for the sacrifice and labor of all who have gone before us
 to make this nation great.

We stop and give thanks to God for the opportunity and freedom
 to choose our work,
 to make what we will with our lives,
 to pursue our dreams,
 to decide for ourselves our destiny.

We stop and give thanks to God
 for our religious lives that exist not by imperial decree or whims of kings,
 but our churches and faith established by God the Holy Spirit
 who makes us a community of friends and servants
 who seek the best for one another.

We stop and give thanks to God
 who provides for us and protects us.

We stop and give thanks to God
 who keeps us, sustains us, delights in us, and abides with us.

And I stop this day to give thanks to God's kingdom
 that is bigger than *any* of us,
 bigger than *all* of us.

Once our ancestors went to war with those of other churches.
 Once our ancestors persecuted and oppressed those of other faith.

Here we are now,
 people of different denominations, traditions, religious histories
 gathered to worship the one Lord of us all.

Here I am now,
 standing alongside of other clergy with whom I have disagreements
 over theology and ecclesiology,
 but who I know to be men of integrity,
 men I respect,
 men of faith.

By God's gracious love and generous Spirit,

we who descend from terrible religious divisions,
we today give thanks
for one another
and for worshipping together
in the name of Jesus our loving Savior.
We give thanks.
Amen.