

November 22, 2020
Sunday Morning Service
Thanksgiving
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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THANKFUL FOR PILGRIMS Psalm 107:1-9

This is the time of year when our minds turn to people who lived in past centuries, who wore odd black clothes and black hats. We think of pictures of them carrying old flintlock rifles and turkeys flung over their backs.

In fact, this year, at almost this very time, we are celebrating the 400th anniversary of these odd folks landing at a place called Plymouth. We should be very thankful for those hardy, devout followers of God who sacrificed so much to leave the comforts and financial security of England and sail to a foreboding new land where they began this wonderful nation we call home.

This is the point where the secular historian will stop us in our reminiscing and tell us that we are totally wrong about our interpretation of history. Yes, there were some religious misfits from England (or more accurately Holland) who sailed to these fair shores in the early 1600's. But they were not the founders of this nation. There had already been settlers in Jamestown Colony for thirteen years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. Furthermore, there were French settlers established in Canada, and Dutch explorers settled in the Hudson Bay area before the Pilgrims ever set sail. And none of those people were trying to establish freedom of worship. In fact, even among passengers of the Mayflower, half of them were adventurers who came to the new world to make money, not serve God.

And furthermore, the colony at Plymouth should not be called Plymouth Plantation but as the new name reveals: *Plimoth Patuxet*, Patuxet being the name by which the original inhabitants, the

Mashpee Wampanoag Nation knew it. But who has the authority to say that the Wampanoags were the first inhabitants of the area?

We, who love Jesus and desire to worship Him freely in spirit and in truth, believe that God used our Pilgrim forefathers to influence the leaders who would later establish this nation to include the important freedoms of religion and speech as inalienable rights of the citizens. If we lived under authorities who curtailed these rights, we would probably be more thankful for the blessings God granted us through the Pilgrims' sacrificial leadership. We will spend time this morning rehearsing the history of these God-led servants and then consider how thankful we should be for what God accomplished through them.

The Pilgrim Story.

The problem started with Henry. King Henry VIII had pretty serious conflict with his religious authorities. That seems odd in light of the fact that in 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 grievances against the Catholic Church to the Wittenburg Chapel door, Henry VIII declared himself to be the defender of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. But that was before 1527, by which time it became obvious that Henry's wife Catherine of Aragon could not produce a male offspring to inherit Henry's throne. The Catholic leaders would not let Henry out of the marriage. So Henry disbarred the Catholic Church, declared himself the head of the new Church of England, divorced Catherine and married Anne Boleyn.

Now that Henry was in charge he could produce offspring who would inherit England's throne. Anne Boleyn produced a daughter who would become Queen Elizabeth I. She was reigning as queen at the time our Pilgrim story began in the late 1500's.

Henry's next wife, Jane Seymour, gave birth to the future King Edward VI. He was a sickly child who actually reigned as king while still a child. It was during that reign that Arch Bishop Cranmar (the real head of the Anglican Church) produced and enforced the Book of Common Prayer for the Church of England. That was one of the first and major elements of the state church's authoritarianism.

Eventually, Jane Seymour's daughter Mary absconded the throne of England. She became known as the infamous Bloody Mary

who murdered hundreds of Protestants, burning many of the Reformation leaders at the stake. She reigned five years and died of influenza. Her sister Elizabeth I took the throne in January 1559 and reigned almost fifty years until 1603. During those years, Queen Elizabeth firmly established the rules of the Church of England. The state Church enforced a clergy hierarchy that led to unqualified clergy simply reading the officially required Book of Common prayer instead of preaching.

King James I took the throne after Elizabeth I died in 1603. He continued to enforce the rules and restrictions of the state church. He is famous for authorizing the Bible in the common language, King James Version. It was during his reign that God began to stir the Pilgrims' hearts and they moved out of England.

There was a serious problem with the state church as the Pilgrims saw it. Sincere believers struggled with the strong-armed enforcement of ecclesiastical rules of the Anglican Church (state church of England). For example: If anyone failed to attend the "approved" church services, or worse, attended an "unlawful assembly," they were punished to the point of being exiled. These kinds of strong-armed tactics naturally led to an important question. Did the political powers have authority to demand a particular form of worship?

The Pilgrim response to that was, "Of course not." As the years wore on, it became evident that a group of believers in the farmlands around Austerfield, England didn't agree with Queen Elizabeth or King James. God's stirring of the hearts was illustrated in one William Bradford who lived with and worked on his uncle's farm in Austerfield. His family had been farmers in that area for at least four generations. But instead of attending the official church in Austerfield, Bradford began meeting with a group of believers in Babworth pastored by Richard Clyfton who preached the need for reforming the Anglican Church.

Probably the separatist movement began in Gainesborough with Pastor John Smyth. It was about a twelve-mile walk for Bradford to walk from his home in Austerfield to either Grainsborough or Babworth to hear Bible preaching. He did it every Sunday. All the villages in that area were small. Put together they probably could not boast of over 1,000 citizens. So why fight the state church? What

difference could such a small group of believers make? Some preachers at the time, like Richard Baxter, truly believed the church could be reformed from within. After his stint in prison, at about the same time John Bunyan was imprisoned the second time, Baxter changed his mind.

Eventually, this group in the Nottinghamshire region began to meet in a central location at the home of William Brewster at Scrooby Manor. This is where they became known as the Congregation at Scrooby. They also became known as Separatists which King James labeled as illegal. By the fall of 1607 the congregation had grown to 200, which called quite a bit of attention to themselves in such a sparsely populated area. At about that same time, some of these people, including William Brewster, were arrested and summoned before the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to explain their rebellion against the "Church."

It became evident to the believers that it was time for them to pursue freedom of worship. This is where the real problems started. The small group of sincere worshipers decided to leave England and go to Holland. It was 1607 under the leadership of Pastor Clyfton when several of the Separatists made plans to leave England for Holland.

They sold many of their possessions. They contracted a ship to spirit them away to Amsterdam. Taking what few possessions they could carry, the group walked 60 miles southwest to Boston where the ship's captain agreed to meet them. However, the English captain had betrayed the Pilgrims to the authorities who arrested them. In time, considering them to be unimportant, the courts released them. But that was not before they had left the Separatists in prison for a month.

After a hard winter, the Pilgrims decided to try again in 1608. This time they hired a Dutch captain and his ship, hoping he would be more considerate than a captain of their own nation. Hoping to attract less attention, they split up, the men walking forty miles to the meeting place near Grimsby. The women were transported by a small boat, which ultimately became grounded at the mouth of a small creek that emptied into the ocean. The Dutch ship showed up a couple days later than scheduled and the men all went aboard. However, while they waited for the tide to free the boat full of women and

children, the English authorities came in hot pursuit. Fearing arrest, the Dutch captain set sail taking the men to Holland and leaving the women and children screaming and crying in the grounded boat where they were arrested once again. The men didn't fare that much better as the ship nearly sank on the way to Holland.

A few at a time, the rest of the congregation escaped to Amsterdam. But life was very difficult for these people who had been mostly farmers but were now thrust into commercial/city life. As a whole, the group was very poor because everyone had to take the most menial jobs due to lack of training. It became evident the congregation could not stay in those conditions and so they decided to move to Leiden, twenty-two miles southwest of the city.

Leiden was more conducive to the people's lives because it was an industrial city, a large part of which was textiles. Some of the people like John Carver and Bradford established profitable businesses. But Leiden also held trials for God's people. It became evident after about eight years that the congregation was losing their children to the world and ways of Holland. Also there was great concern that the ten-year treaty that halted Holland's war with Spain was about to expire.

In light of those concerns, the congregation determined to "Go west young man." In the year 1617, they began three years of planning to move to who knows where. Several ideas were floated but the people finally settled on England's colony in the New World. Through much disappointment and disagreement, they finally settled on contracting with the First Virginia Company (also known as the London Company) to sail to Jamestown Colony. In the process of planning, the London Company went bankrupt. But Thomas Weston put together a group of investors known as the "Merchant Adventurers" who would finance the trip to the new world. Their motive was obviously financial.

Now the little group began to make great sacrifices (again) to make a most major move. In there story is an important principle. Pilgrim farmers should never buy ships. Plans were being finalized by June 1620 which was planting time in New England. It is likely that young William Bradford put together final plans to sail out of Holland because older leaders were negotiating in London and William Brewster was hiding out from the authorities. The Pilgrims

sold more of their possessions to purchase the *Speedwell*, a small ship that was in need of much repair. As we will see, farmers are not good assayers of ships. The Merchant Adventurers, on the other hand, did not purchase, but rented, the *Mayflower* which was a larger ship (120' x 25').

If the Pilgrims thought they had sailed through rough seas up to this point, they were in for a sad awakening. The members of the congregation who chose to leave sailed out of Delftshaven, Holland on July 21, 1620. They sailed to Southampton, England where they met the "Strangers" (people going to the New World for the "Merchant Adventurers"), docking the *Speedwell* beside the *Mayflower*. On August 5, 1620 the two ships set sail from England but quickly discover that the *Speedwell* was leaking like a sieve. Both ships returned to Dartmouth where two weeks of repairs were made. Once again they set sail only to discover 300 miles out to sea that the *Speedwell* was not sound enough to make the trip.

Returning, ironically, to Plymouth, England, the *Speedwell* was abandoned. Twenty people abandoned the trip at that point and the remaining passengers (102 Pilgrims and Strangers) were crowded into the second deck while 30 crew members were on the upper decks. The *Mayflower* was not a fast ship, sailing at about two miles per hour. Finally the sixty-six day voyage began September 6, 1620. About halfway to their destination the *Mayflower* ran into "The storms of the equinox" (changing of the four seasons). The writers recorded that it was one storm after another, day after day being driven by the winds and waves with no sail hoisted.

Remember, this would have been about the middle of October, 1620. We call these storms "Tropical disturbances" "Tropical storms" or "Hurricanes." Bradford wrote that the ship was shrewdly shaken, and the seams of the decks opened. Frigid water cascaded down upon the Pilgrims, already badly frightened by the storm the like of which they had never seen on land. He told of, "A lusty young man (called John Howland) coming upon some occasion above the gratings, was with a seele of the ship, thrown into the sea; but it pleased God that he caught hold of the topsail halyards, which hung overboard, and ran out at length, yet he held his hold (though he was sundry fathoms under the water) till he was hauled up by the same rope to the brim of the water; and then with a boat hook, and other means got into the

ship again and his life saved; though he was something ill with it, yet he lived many years after, and became a profitable member, both in church and commonwealth.” (William Bradford, *On Plymouth Plantation*)

After sixty-six boring or harrowing days, someone shouted, “Land Ho!” The storm had blown them so far off course that when they saw land, it was not the Virginia coastline but the “wrist” of Cape Cod. Deciding to sail south to “Hudson Bay Colony,” they ran into bad seas and turned back. It was November 10, 1620, as the ship sat in Cape Cod Bay, the Pilgrim leaders and Strangers drew up the Mayflower Compact which served as an example for the founding documents of our nation.

Beginning on Monday, November 13, explorers went out looking for a suitable place, eventually stumbling on a suitable place called Plimoth. The sailors and explorers actually used a map that John Smith (of Pocahontas fame) made in 1614. He had pinpointed a place he named “Plimoth.” There the hardy settlers finally stood on land at the place they would call home, thankful to God for His leading and protection.

But there they stood on a foreboding land in the beginning of winter with almost nothing! Bradford wrote: “What could now sustain them, but the Spirit of God and His grace?” May not, ought not the children of these fathers say, “Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness, but they cried unto the Lord, and He heard their voice, and looked on their adversity” (Deut. 26:5,7).

Then, quoting from Psalm 107 Bradford wrote, “Let them therefore praise the Lord, because He is good; and His mercies endure forever. Yea, let them which have been redeemed of the Lord, show how He hath delivered them, from the hand of the oppressor. When they wandered in the desert wilderness out of the way, and found no city to dwell in; both hungry, and thirsty, their soul was overwhelmed in them. Let them confess before the Lord His loving kindness, and His wonderful works before the sons of men” (vv. 1,2,4,5,8).

The God Worthy of Thanksgiving (Psalm 107:1-9).

In this psalm that came to Bradford’s mind after so many hardships, the psalmist called for thanksgiving to God. *Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever (v.1)!* It is a call for God’s people to give voice to thanksgiving to the Lord. It is good to be thankful in your heart. But it is better to speak your thanksgiving so that others can be encouraged and challenged.

We speak out thanksgiving acknowledging that God saves. *Let the redeemed of the LORD say so (v.2a).* We see this truth applied most obviously to our eternal salvation. We should be so thankful for the assurance that we will spend eternity with Christ that we should say it out loud often. But the word redeemed also applies to the times when God picks us out of physical, actual trouble in this life.

Why? For what specific reasons should God’s people be thankful to Him? The psalmist pointed out that the people God has gathered have reason for thanksgiving. We are those, *whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in (vv.2b-7).*

Does this apply to us modern, gathered people of God? Yes. We all have endured unusual and unsettling circumstances over the past months. Some of us have experienced these things for much longer. It is most unsettling when circumstances turn negative and we don’t understand. For example, we really do not know the full extent of the pandemic. On the worldwide political scene, we really don’t know who to believe. We wonder who is actually in control of world events. We are unsure about our rights and freedoms in days to come.

On a more personal level, many of our people have experienced physical setbacks, financial setbacks, loss of loved ones, unexpected suffering in so many ways. Many of our people might well feel like who the psalmist described as, *Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them (vv.4-5).*

Problems are seldom foreign to God's gathered people. But, in spite of trials (or even because of trials), let us be thankful. We cry out to God and He proves faithful to help. *Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress (v.6).* Furthermore, we acknowledge that God does astonishing work. *Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men (v.8)!* His common grace is incomprehensible. His steadfast love to us, His people, is incomprehensible. He has redeemed us eternally. We are the people *whom he has redeemed from trouble (v.2).* God has gathered us together as His people out of all nations and peoples. He *gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south (v.3).*

And that God satisfies the longing soul. *For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things (v.9).* Our Pilgrim foregatherers longed for freedom to worship God according to their understanding and conscience. We take such freedom for granted (but may well lose it one day). We find it difficult to truly hunger for fellowship with God because of all the distraction from passing things of Vanity Fair.

But when troubles come . . . such as when we can't get to services to fellowship with God's people. Or maybe it appears that the boat we purchased with hard-earned money was a rip off. Or we discover that our best-laid plans turn out not at all like we hoped. Or we feel like we have just been washed overboard by circumstances out of our control. When troubles like that overwhelm us, we cry out to God and He answers us with His steadfast love. He proves to us again from the promises of His Word that He is sufficient to satisfy our real needs. And being satisfied we thank Him.

So often "thanksgiving" is forced, insincere. But if we honestly consider how faithful God is to reveal His unchanging love to us over and over, we will not be able to not be thankful. Like the Pilgrims, let's thank God for the Pilgrims.