

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
November 18, 2018

Joel 2:23-29

Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil. "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm my great army that I sent among you. You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed. Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed. "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

Thanksgiving Sunday Sermon

Though it only arrived on my doorstep this past Wednesday, I've sort of been cramming...reading this new book called *The First Thanksgiving* (Subtitle: *What the real story tells us about Loving God and Learning from History*) by author Robert Tracy MacKenzie.

I haven't read enough to weave it in entirety into today's sermon, but I've read enough to say to you I think we should read this book together – to prepare for 2020, for one thing. Faith practices, culture, myth and reality, How the Pilgrims were different than we might think, How they inspire us today It's all in there, and I look forward to future book discussions.

For today, let me tell you some things I've recently learned, or been reminded of. Some of this won't be news to some of you. But here goes.

The Pilgrims, spiritually speaking, religiously speaking, were very different from us. For one, they followed a different calendar. Their New Year's Day came on March 25th – not that they celebrated it. They did not celebrate Christmas, because they basically didn't celebrate holidays, viewing them as papist inventions. As John Robinson noted in a sermon, there was no scriptural mandate for December 25th, or for celebrating Jesus birth The same went for Easter. Every Sunday was a celebration of the resurrection, and to set aside one Sunday each year from all the rest was presumptuous. In truth, they probably would have felt that way about a yearly celebration of Thanksgiving.

Did you know, however, that the Pilgrims actually wore colorful clothes? Get ready Kelley and Michael and Jenny -- for the Pilgrim dress we'll have made for you soon so we can once again celebrate this way next year -- should not be browns and beiges, somber tones, but red, blue, green, yellow or russet, for if the Pilgrims viewed the first thanksgiving as a time of rejoicing, as they surely did, scholars now tell us these would have been the colors they would have worn.

Did you know that the Pilgrims rejected the King James bible? King James had an agenda, you see, to replace the Geneva bible of 1560. That was the bible the separatists loved, with its margin notes undermining the notion of the "divine right of kings".

Did you know that when the Pilgrims prayed they did not bow their heads as is the custom for us, but rather looked with their eyes wide open to heaven? "Their eyes of the mind are lifted to God in prayer" said Pastor Robinson. "Why not their eyes of the body also?" Did you know that at meals, the Pilgrims thought it best to pray not once, but twice. First would be a blessing, upon that they had and were about to eat, and then, afterward, they would return thanks to God for the meal they had shared. (McKenzie, *The First Thanksgiving*, p. 103)

Here's another thing I recently learned: The Pilgrims would have very much looked askance at our modern wedding customs, certainly the extravaganza aspect. In fact, while they looked upon marriage as a divinely inspired institution, they wanted nothing to do with church weddings. Their point was that no where in the bible does it say that church leaders are to solemnize marriages. By only recognizing marriages performed by a priest, the Separatists believed that Catholics and Anglicans were guilty of aggrandizing the role of the church and forcing unbelievers to submit to the religious rite. Couples truly faithful to the word of God would therefore insist on being married by a civil magistrate. (McKenzie, p. 103)

The Pilgrims would also have looked askance at much of our modern understandings of "liberty". Central to their thinking was the notion of covenant, of being bound to God and in a sense to one another as the body of Christ. The liberty they venerated honored *obedience* more than autonomy, *order* more than individualism, *service* more than self-expression. As Robert MacKenzie puts it "Liberty, thus understood, was the freedom not to do what you wanted but to do what was right, to pursue a life of faithfulness in the network of relationships in which God had placed you." (p. 106) Single people who came across did not live on their own, but with a family. Listen to these words by deacon Cushman in a sermon preached in Plymouth in 1621: "Nothing in this world doth more resemble heavenly happiness then for human beings to live as one, being of one heart and one soul....neither anything more resembles hellish horror than for every man to shift for himself." (Cushman, "The Sin and Danger of Self-Love", a sermon preached at Plymouth, 1621)

A final note in our Pilgrim remembrances: the simple but perhaps forgotten reality that the Pilgrims very much understood themselves *as pilgrims*. They saw their journey across the ocean as being like the Exodus – God leading them from a place that could not be their home, to a new place, a place of freedom and economic opportunity. But there was another sense of being pilgrim that they held: that of being temporary travelers in a world that was not their home. When William Bradford wrote *Of Plymouth Plantation*, he described an emotional scene when the members of the Leiden congregation leaving were saying goodbye to those who were being left behind. “With an abundance of tears” he writes, “the group left that goodly and pleasant city that had been their resting place for near twelve years, *but they knew they were pilgrims* and looked not so much on those things, but lifted up their eyes to the heavens, to their dearest country, and quieted their spirits.” (Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, p. 370) Bradford was working from Hebrews, chapter 11, the great role call of the heroes of the faith, in using that imagery – the idea of seeking a country, not a worldly location, but a heavenly one.

Which brings us, at long last to Joel. As has already been said, we don’t know a lot about Joel, but we do know this writing comes in the midst of, or rather in a time of coming out of a time of great trial. Which makes you wonder if it might not have been a very favorite scripture of the Pilgrims. Locusts are locusts, and they can wreak havoc. But think for a bit about what the Pilgrims endured. Not only the trip across on that tiny ship, But the first year, specifically the first winter. Scurvy, pneumonia, the journey over weakened them, and then they often had to make trips wading in frigid water in Plymouth Harbor going to and fro from the Mayflower, as the longboat was unavailable, being used for expeditions and also undergoing repairs.

Within weeks, 52 of the 102 passengers who had reached Cape Cod were dead. The Pilgrims called it the “starving disease” or “the wasting disease”. At worst, the epidemic claimed two or three lives a day, and at its worst there were only half a dozen people who were well enough to tend to all those who were ill. Of the eighteen married couples who had sailed from England, only three were still intact. (McKenzie, p. 91) The higher death toll among adults meant the children and teenagers became half of the remaining population (up from approximately one third before the general sickness)

So how did the Pilgrims see God in the midst of all this? At bible study this week we had a long discussion of the theology that says that everything that happens comes from the hand of God. Surely the devout had been schooled to see God’s hand in every trial, So they spoke of this illness and great loss as being somehow of God, while others would have said that God was present in all things or to be found in trial, which is different from saying that bad things come to us as a form of punishment and chastisement from God. “For every circumstance we learn something if we are open to it” someone said in bible study this week.

What did the Pilgrims learn about relying on God, about the importance of trust and community and perseverance as they made their way through that first hard year? Perhaps we might bring that question home. What have you learned about those things as you've made your way through years that were difficult and trying, years when it was hard to see or believe in "better times ahead". Perhaps for you this year has been such a year. Or perhaps you find yourself, like the people in Joel's time, moving out of times that have been particularly hard.

"You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied" Joel lifts up this hope, that things are going to turn, are turning already. The simplest thing, rain on parched land, is a sign of this turning. There is this vision—a collective one -- of plenty and salvation. Everyone will have enough, everyone will eat. And the shame, the time of shame and sorrow will be no more.

This is repeated twice. *It's going to get better.* This is what the Pilgrims surely felt as come spring the dying subsided, the weather improved, and the earth brought forth an abundant harvest. They could see a brighter future. So even in the midst of all that loss, there was cause for deep gratitude.

We don't know all of what the first Thanksgiving meant to the Pilgrims. It was described by Edward Winslow but not really reflected upon in depth by any of the Pilgrims. But we can imagine in giving thanks they saw God as the one that would see them through. Surely they gave thanks for the good crops, for food to eat, and for what they had accomplished working together. Perhaps they asked to be more grateful, to have eyes that would see all of life as blessing.

A writer named Harold Bester wrote an essay, some of you may have read it, about living in an outermost house on Cape Cod. When asked what he discovered during that time, he said that "We should learn to reverence the night and put away the vulgar fear of it." He loved the constant shorebird migrations, but even more he loved to go out at night and stare at the cosmos. So often we fear night, we overdo tragic interpretations, when all around us beautiful stars exist in the dark. (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, volume 4, Donna Schaper, p. 197)

Perhaps this gets to the Pilgrims celebrating Thanksgiving at the end of such a year. *Thanksgiving is about where we chose to live.* We can "live in the dark darkly, or we can retrain our vision to focus on what is good." (Schaper, p. 197) The person who has lost their mate, but comes to help at Monday Meals, or chooses to visit others who are lonely knows something of this.

Sometimes such insight happens to us without our being so purposive in seeking it. Mary Beth Simmons, co-author of *The Grateful Life*, recalls how she struggled when her mother and father passed away – not quickly – but over six long years of illness and multiple hospitalizations. At the same time, she was also helping to raise her three year old granddaughter. She discovered that playing with her granddaughter opened the door to healing gratitude. "Playing with this toddler" she said "unplugged my fear, letting me shed tears of sorrow and joy, and gave me hope

and reverence for the precious moments spent at my parents sides.” (Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*, p. 117)

Diana Budge shares (and I have asked her permission to share this) how as her daughter Liisa was going through her illness a neighbor who had been little more than an acquaintance offered to help, to keep Liisa company when her husband or other family members could not be there. Over the months and weeks, she became a best friend to Liisa, something Liisa had always wanted but had not really known. It came out of the blue, unexpected, and that woman, this friendship, is now today something --in the midst of all the feelings of loss -- that shines forth as something hopeful, something to give thanks for.

As I grow older, I see how Thanksgiving and Gratitude are like this. It is all bound up, life that is – joy and sorrow, celebration and struggle, hope and reverence, and most of all, our desire for openness to what is yet to unfold. We should keep this in mind as we gather around tables this week, as we hold the hands of someone who is struggling, or as we ourselves are struggling. In Thanksgiving we are not so much counting our blessings, as in naming what is going right, as we are opening ourselves to the presence of God in all circumstances, seeing us through. We are not so much counting our blessings as we are opening our hearts in gratitude so as to live as seekers of the light, so as to be open to surprising gifts of hope and meaning and love that come to us often in the hard times, in the odd times, so that in times that we would not necessarily imagine ourselves saying thank you, we find we can.... and we do.

Amen.