

**THE PILGRIMS – A Telling in 3 Parts**  
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**Thanksgiving Sunday, November 22, 2009**  
**Psalm 100**

Part I: “The Calling and Voyage”

In September, 1620, a little ship called the Mayflower sailed out of Plymouth, England. There were one hundred two passengers on board – men, women, children – calling themselves, Pilgrims. Well, one hundred four if you count the two Pilgrim dogs – a spaniel and a mastiff. The ship’s crew numbered 20 under the command of Master Christopher Jones.

The Mayflower, no Queen Mary, was barely one hundred feet long. The passengers were literally crammed in the “tween deck,” which was little more than a crawlspace between the cargo hold and the upper deck.

A second ship, called the Speedwell, had also begun the voyage. But the Speedwell was an ill-named vessel, slow and leaky. After turning back twice for repairs, most of the Speedwell’s passengers abandoned the voyage, and others squeezed onto the Mayflower, which sailed out of Plymouth solo.

It was a high-risk journey. A year earlier another group of Pilgrims had tried the voyage. Before the ship turned back, 130 of the 180 passengers died. And in the previous two years at the Jamestown settlement in Virginia, 3000 of the 3600 settlers had died.

So who were they – this intrepid band aboard the Mayflower? What mattered enough to leave everything behind and risk this voyage? What was the Pilgrim passion and quest?

They were known as “Separatists.” They worshiped in clandestine, illegal gatherings. For the Pilgrims wanted to be free of state church mandated liturgy, the doctrine of bishops, and the religious whims of kings. What they believed was that a congregation ought to be free to order its own life.

They were, you see, these Pilgrims, the first congregationalists – our spiritual forebears. We are the great, great, great church grandchildren of the Pilgrims – our congregational ancestors....

Some of the Pilgrims had fled first to Holland. But even in that more religiously tolerant country, they were still considered outsiders and religious renegades. So they marshaled their faith and pooled their resources for a great and dangerous pilgrimage. For they believed that God was calling them to this new land, America, where they’d be free to practice this new way of being church – congregationalism.

Three men – John Carver, William Brewster, and William Bradford – were the Pilgrim leaders. It is from Bradford’s diary that we know the story of this pilgrimage.

But none of them were experienced explorers. They were families of weavers, tailors, shoemakers, farmers, printers. Almost half of those on board the Mayflower were children.

For 65 days the Mayflower fought Atlantic headwinds and storms, which became worse the further they sailed. Saltwater constantly dripped through the deck into the passenger “tween.” Virtually everyone was sick. As October became the cold of November, firewood for the ship’s stoves ran out. The water casks were almost empty. A crew member died, even as a baby was born who was appropriately named Oceanus.

On the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, when it seemed the voyage would never end, land was sighted – the forearm of what is now called Cape Cod. Bradford’s diary records that those who were able gathered on deck while William Brewster read the 100<sup>th</sup> Psalm.

In the cabin below, a paper was prepared for signatures. Known as the Mayflower Compact, in part it reads: “We the undersigned...having undertaken a voyage for the glory of God...do covenant ourselves together...for the good of all....”

In this current period of our history when the cult of self-interest is so rampant, it would be good, I think, to picture in our minds those Pilgrims recommitting their lives for the common good....

Part II: “The First Winter”

With the Mayflower at anchor exploring parties were sent out in the ship’s small boat to find a settlement site. The supplies were almost depleted and it was getting colder by the day. People could not survive much longer on the ship.

One exploring party came upon some native Indians cleaning fish, who fled into the trees. A second exploring group was attacked, with arrows flying out of the brush. Muskets were fired back. The attackers fled. No Pilgrim was hit. The men gave God thanks and prayed that no native Indian had been harmed either. If only that prayer had been remembered by the generations who followed the Pilgrims.

But neither exploration found a place with enough fresh water and a deep enough anchorage. It was now December. Ice on the deck of the ship was a serious problem. There was unspoken panic aboard the Mayflower.

In a desperate race against time another exploration was sent out. By luck or providence, this team was caught in a howling snowstorm which blew their boat across Cape Cod Bay into a smaller bay where they beached and spent the night standing close to a fire to keep from freezing to death.

But morning revealed that they had found their new home. There was a fresh water river, moorage for ships, trees for lumber, and cornfields nearby that had been abandoned. Why abandoned? Earlier English fishermen had reported great populations of native peoples. Where were they?

The Pilgrims would later find many abandoned fields and villages, along with mass graves. For the native population had been decimated by disease. Infected by contact with English and French explorers, the native people had no immunity. Entire villages were wiped out.

The Pilgrims were in their own race for survival. The Mayflower anchored in what the Pilgrims named Plymouth Harbor and they began building the first common house.

The winter winds were cruel - the snow deep. Half the Pilgrims died that first winter. Unable to bury the dead in the frozen ground, they covered the bodies with snow, hoping the Indians would not see how few Pilgrims were left. And they prayed and wondered if any would survive to live the Pilgrim dream.

Winter did pass. And one March day a single native person walked boldly into the tiny settlement. To the astonishment of the Pilgrims, in clear English he called out, “Welcome Englishmen!”

His name was Samoset and he had learned English from cod fishermen. He told of another named Squanto, who had been a slave in London and spoke fine English. And of a chief Massasoit, who had been watching the Pilgrims and was now prepared to come in peace.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, sixty some Pokanoket men approached Plymouth, led by Massasoit. The chief was invited into the common house and offered gifts of an English hunting coat and some biscuits.

With Squanto interpreting, the Pilgrim leader William Carver pledged peace and goodwill. Massasoit offered a pledge as well. He said, "For as long as the moon rises, and the grass grows green, and the rivers flow, we will live in peace."

It was an act of trust and faith on Massasoit's part, given that his own people had lost many from the white man's disease. And English cod fishermen had a history of taking native people as slaves.

Carver and Massasoit then broke and shared a biscuit as a sign that it would be so. Later, of course, the next generations of settlers would forget this biscuit communion and pledge....

It was also agreed that Squanto would remain with the Pilgrims to show them how to live on this land. And so he did...teach them how to plant native corn in mounds fertilized by herring, and how to dig clams and find ground nuts and wild bean. Without this crash course in Indian agriculture, the Pilgrims would not have survived a second winter.

Even as Massasoit could have chosen to attack and wipe out this small, vulnerable group of settlers. But he didn't.

For Massasoit had watched them pray. They were different somehow than those who had come before....

### Part III: "Thanksgiving"

The first autumn was startling to the Pilgrims. In Britain the autumn colors were muted. But in New England the reds of the maples, the yellow of the birches, and the orange of the hickories...were a feast for the eyes. And they had food enough for the next winter. The Pilgrim's spiritual leader, William Bradford, declared it time to "rejoice after a more special manner."

And they wanted to share this thanksgiving with their native neighbors. So Squanto was sent to Massasoit with an invitation to bring his village to dinner. The chief accepted and the preparations began. Cooking fires blazed, rough hewn tables and benches were made - the baking and preparing took three days.

On the appointed feast day, ninety-one native guests arrived – men, women, children – to join the fifty surviving Pilgrims. As his contribution to the feast, Massasoit presented five freshly killed deer.

And it was to be a feast indeed, with tables laden with game and fish, chowder and vegetables, cornbread and maple sugar. Historians debate if there was turkey. Alas, there was no pumpkin pie or cranberry sauce. As there were no forks or spoons, everything was finger food.

In our minds, we can probably do away with those Hallmark card images of the Pilgrims in buckle shoes and funny hats sitting at tables with white linens while the Indians look on. The real thing was probably more like a church potluck picnic. How long do you suppose it took before the Pilgrim and Pokanoket children began a game of tag?

And though they didn't speak the same language, among the adults that day there must have been a powerful, unspoken bond. For everyone – Pilgrim and Pokanoket - had recently lost someone beloved.

And yet...there was still life...miraculous...a wonderous gift. And there they were, in a sacred web of relationship, with each other and with everything that had sustained them.

When all was ready, the Pilgrims bowed their heads and thanked God for these fruits of the earth, and for this new land on which to live their congregational way, and for their native Indian friends without whom the Pilgrims would not have survived.

Massasoit offered his own blessing, turning in all four directions, and asking the Great Spirit of sky and earth, wind and water, forest and living things, to make sacred this sharing of food and friendship.

William Carver read again the 100<sup>th</sup> Psalm: “Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth.... Give thanks to God.... For God is good....”

Then everyone, Pilgrim and Native American, looked at each other with that universal expression of, “It’s time to eat....”