

Thanksgiving Story and Readings

We have all heard of the Mayflower and the Pilgrims. Little did they know that from such humble beginnings they would be the beginning of a great and prosperous nation.

We do well, in the midst of this plenty, to remember where we came from, and how we got here.

In August 1620, a group of about 40 people seeking religious freedom joined a much larger group of (comparatively) secular colonists and set sail from England on two merchant ships: the Mayflower and the Speedwell. The Speedwell began to leak almost immediately, however, and the ships headed back to port. The travelers squeezed themselves and their belongings onto the Mayflower and set sail once again. In addition to the 102 passengers, the officers and crew consisted of about 25–30 persons, bringing the total persons on board the Mayflower to approximately 130.

Because of the delay caused by the leaky Speedwell, the Mayflower had to cross the Atlantic at the height of storm season. As a result, the journey was horribly unpleasant. Many of the passengers were so seasick they could scarcely get up, and the waves were so rough that one of the passengers was swept overboard and drowned.

After two miserable months at sea, the ship finally reached the New World. However, they had landed far north of where they were supposed to be, and the territory was unknown. More time was spent attempting to find an appropriate place to harbor and begin a settlement.

They finally landed in Plymouth on December 23, 1620. Think about that – in the dead of winter. Remember that the climate in Massachusetts is quite cold in the winter. Remember that in late December, there isn't much daylight, and they didn't have electric lights, so they could only work during the short daylight hours. There was snow, and ice, and it was cold, and every once in a while, a storm would blow in so that they couldn't work at all, but just had to huddle together on their ship. I don't know if we can appreciate just how hard it was for them.

They began building houses, but were terribly delayed by the weather and the fact that a large percentage of their able bodied were laid up with illness and injury.

On January 14 one of their new houses they were building caught fire and burned down. Many took to staying aboard ship for lack of anywhere to stay – not enough houses had been built, and their great house, for meetings and such, was the one that burned. The close cramped quarters on the ship, the malnourishment and exposure all began to take their toll.

You may have heard of the legend of the 5 kernels of corn – the story goes that they had run through their supplies, and had to ration their seed corn – for if they ate all their corn they would have none to plant for the new year. Thus, we hear they lived on five kernels of corn per day.

Regardless of that legend, the facts remain that between starvation and disease, by spring, only 53 passengers and half the crew remained alive. Fully half their number had died during that first winter.

In the spring, they diligently applied themselves and at the end of summer and into the fall of 1621 they had managed to do quite well. In November, after the crops had been harvested, and food stored for the winter, they decided to have a large feast to celebrate their fortune and to give thanks. They invited

the neighboring Wampanoag tribe, and put on a feed for about 140 people. Their fortunes had changed dramatically in less than a year.

We know from the cycle of readings at the time, that they would have read the following before their meal. It was timely then, it is timely now.

1 "All the commandment which I command you this day you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD swore to give to your fathers.

2 And you shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not.

3* And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.

...

6 So you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him.

7 For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, 9 a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper.

10 And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. 11 "Take heed lest you forget the LORD your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes, which I command you this day:

12 lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, 13 and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied,

14 then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage...

17 Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.'

18 You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth; that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers, as at this day.

19 And if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you this day that you shall surely perish.

20 Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

So, bearing in mind all that God has done for us, and bearing in mind this early warning to what is now a proud and haughty nation, let us remember the LORD and give Him thanks.