

November 22, 2009

## TRULY THANKFUL

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Thanksgiving Day is upon us, and it is intended to be a time of reflection on God's goodness to us. However, it's more or less become something that commercial interests simply step over in the rush to make Christmas cash. It used to be that stores would shut down on Thanksgiving Day and re-open the next day with special sales; but that strategy is passing now. A growing number of retailers are open for business on Thanksgiving; in fact, it's becoming a shopping event in and of itself. You may have seen retailers hosting special sales events such as "Gobblepalooza" at Old Navy, in which you are supposed to take your family to their store for shopping and rock and roll.

Furthermore, it seems that the more we have, the less thankful we have become. This is true for us personally as well as nationally.

Let's set the clock back a little bit and talk about the importance of this Christian American holiday. We'll start back at the beginning and sift through some of the myths that have grown up along the way.

### Psalm 100

- 1 A Psalm of praise. Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands.*
- 2 Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing.*
- 3 Know ye that the LORD he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*
- 4 Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name.*
- 5 For the LORD is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations.*

### The Pilgrims and America's First Thanksgiving

In 1609, a group of Pilgrims left England for the religious freedom in Holland. After a few years, their children were speaking Dutch and had become attached to the Dutch way of life. This worried the Pilgrims. They considered the Dutch frivolous and their ideas a threat to their children's education and morality—they were "worldly." Therefore, they decided to leave Holland and travel to the New World. Their trip was financed by a group of English investors, the Merchant Adventurers. It was agreed that the Pilgrims would be given passage and supplies in exchange for their working for their backers for seven years.

On Sept. 6, 1620, the Pilgrims set sail for the New World on a ship called the Mayflower. Aboard were forty-four Pilgrims, who called themselves the “Saints,” and sixty-six others, whom the Pilgrims called “Strangers.”

**Myth One: Mayflower passengers were Puritans.**

REALITY: Puritans wanted to purify the Church of England, while Separatists took a more extreme approach: they desired to separate entirely from it. Mayflower Pilgrims are properly classified as Separatists.

In general, Separatist views were not as extreme as Puritanical beliefs regarding social customs, but were more extreme when it came to separating ties with the established Church of England.<sup>1</sup>

**Myth Two: The Mayflower passengers always wore black and white clothes, without any color, and had big buckles.**

REALITY: Wearing only colorless clothing was occasionally a Puritan extreme, but not a Separatist extreme. When a Mayflower passenger died, an inventory of the person's estate was taken by the Court, for purposes of probate. These inventories show that John Howland had two red waistcoats. William Bradford had a green gown, violet cloak, lead colored suit with silver buttons, and a red waistcoat. And William Brewster had green drawers, a red cap, and a violet coat. Black, white, grey, and brown were by far the most common colors worn by the Pilgrims, but were definitely not the only colors.

The Pilgrims did not have buckles on their clothing, shoes, or hats. Buckles did not come into fashion until the late 1600s.<sup>2</sup>

The long trip was cold and damp and took sixty-five days. Since there was the danger of fire on the wooden ship, the food had to be eaten cold. Many passengers became sick and one person had died by the time land was sighted on November 10th.

The long trip led to many disagreements between the “Saints” and the “Strangers.” After land was sighted, the Pilgrims held a meeting worked out an agreement called *The Mayflower Compact*, which guaranteed equality and unified the two groups. They joined together and named themselves the “Pilgrims.”

Although they had first sighted land off Cape Cod, they did not settle until they arrived at Plymouth. It was there that the Pilgrims decide to settle. Plymouth offered an excellent harbor. A large brook offered a resource for fish. The Pilgrims biggest concern was attack by the local Native American Indians. But the Patuxets were a peaceful group and did not prove to be a threat.

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1 Caleb Johnson, “Mayflower Myths.” Available at [http://www.wtv-zone.com/Castle\\_Keep/holiday\\_castle/Thanksgiving\\_Castle/Oven-1/2.html](http://www.wtv-zone.com/Castle_Keep/holiday_castle/Thanksgiving_Castle/Oven-1/2.html).

2 Ibid.

**Myth Three: The Pilgrims stole the land for their Colony from the Indians, and mistreated them.**

REALITY: The Pilgrims arrived and found a place to settle, called Plymouth on Captain John Smith's map of 1614. The native Indians called the area Patuxet. The Patuxet tribe had been completely wiped out in a 1618 plague (probably smallpox), and so there was at the time no tribe inhabiting or claiming the land the Pilgrims settled. The only Patuxet survivor of the plague was Tisquantum, more commonly called "Squanto" (who had been in England at the time of the plague). Squanto was accepted into the Plymouth Colony and acted as interpreter and negotiator with Massasoit and the Wampanoag confederation of tribes—the Pilgrims nearest neighbors.

The Wampanoag never overtly challenged the Pilgrims' right to live on the land (until 75 years later), and in fact it appears Massasoit liked the idea of having Englishmen neighbors and allies because it increased his own power within the region by keeping his enemies at bay.<sup>3</sup>

**Myth Four: The Mayflower was headed for Virginia, but due to a gross navigational error they ended up making landfall at Cape Cod in Massachusetts.**

REALITY: This myth is caused by a failure to elaborate on the facts, rather than a misrepresentation of them. The Pilgrims in their writings and documents (including the Mayflower Compact itself) refer a place called "Northern Virginia." However, we are often left to assume that "Northern Virginia" is relative to the modern-day State of Virginia, thus suggesting the Mayflower was off course by almost 500 miles.

In fact, the Virginia Company (and thus the "state" of Virginia at the time) had rights to almost the entire eastern seaboard of America. When the Pilgrims say "Northern Virginia," they are referring to a region which on modern maps would be roughly southern New York State.

Based on numerous contemporary accounts, including Bradford's own *History*, it is quite clear that the Pilgrims originally intended to settle the Hudson River region (near Long Island, New York)—a part of Northern Virginia (although the Dutch also claimed the New York region). Once Cape Cod was sighted, they turned south to head for the Hudson River, but encountered treacherous seas and nearly shipwrecked. They then decided to return to Cape Cod rather than risk another attempt to head south.<sup>4</sup>

The first winter was devastating to the Pilgrims. The cold, snow and sleet were exceptionally heavy, interfering with the workers as they tried to construct their settlement. March brought warmer weather and the health of the Pilgrims improved, but many had died during the long winter. Of the one hundred ten Pilgrims and crew who left England, just fifty-two survived the first winter.

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

**Myth Five: During the famine of 1621, the Pilgrims were only rationed five kernels of corn to eat per day.**

This was a myth that apparently began in 1820. It has no foundation in historical fact. Five kernels of corn would have no nutritional value whatsoever; yet not a single Pilgrim died from the food shortages of 1621. There was a shortage of planted crops that year, and hunger was a problem, but their diet was supplemented by enough fish, shellfish, nuts, waterfowl, turkeys and deer to keep everyone alive. It's safe to say that the large number of deaths were due largely to exposure and disease.<sup>5</sup>

On March 16, 1621, what was to become an important event took place, an Indian brave walked into the Plymouth settlement. The Pilgrims were frightened until the Indian called out "Welcome" (in English!).

His name was Samoset and he was an Abnaki Indian. He had learned English from the captains of fishing boats that had sailed off the coast. Samoset left the next day. He soon returned with another Indian named Squanto, who spoke better English than Samoset. Squanto told the Pilgrims of his voyages across the ocean to England and Spain as a slave.

Squanto's importance to the Pilgrims was enormous and it can be said that they would not have survived without his help. Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to tap the maple trees for sap. He taught them which plants were poisonous and which had medicinal powers. He taught them how to plant the Indian corn by heaping the earth into low mounds with several seeds and fish in each mound. The decaying fish fertilized the corn. He also taught them to plant other crops with the corn.

The harvest in October was very successful and the Pilgrims found themselves with enough food to put away for the winter. There was corn, fruits and vegetables, fish to be packed in salt, and meat to be cured over smoky fires.

The Pilgrims had much to celebrate: they had built homes in the wilderness, they had raised enough crops to keep them alive during the long coming winter, they were at peace with their Indian neighbors. They had beaten the odds and it was time to celebrate.

Governor William Bradford proclaimed a day of thanksgiving to be shared by all the colonists and the neighboring Native Americans. They invited Squanto and the other Indians to join them in their celebration. Their chief, Massasoit, and ninety braves came to the celebration, which lasted for three days. They played games, ran races, marched and played drums. The Indians demonstrated their skills with the bow and arrow and the Pilgrims demonstrated their musket skills. Exactly when the festival took place is uncertain, but it is believed the celebration took place in mid-October.

Our corn [i.e., wheat] did prove well, and God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn, and our barley indifferent good, but our peas not worth the gathering, for we feared they were too late sown. They came up very well, and blossomed, but the sun

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5 Ibid.

parched them in the blossom. Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty [Edward Winslow's account, December 12, 1621].

They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercising in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides they had about a peck of meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports [William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*].

The following year the Pilgrims harvest was not as bountiful, as they were still unused to growing the corn. During the year they had also shared their stored food with newcomers and the Pilgrims ran short of food.

The third year brought a spring and summer that was hot and dry with the crops dying in the fields. Governor Bradford ordered a day of fasting and prayer, and it was soon thereafter that the rain came. To celebrate, November 29th of that year was proclaimed a day of thanksgiving. This date is believed to be the real true beginning of the present day Thanksgiving Day.

The custom of an annually celebrated thanksgiving, held after the harvest, continued through the years. During the American Revolution (late 1770s) a day of national thanksgiving was suggested by the Continental Congress.

In 1817 New York State adopted Thanksgiving Day as an annual custom. By the middle of the 19th century many other states also celebrated a Thanksgiving Day. In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln appointed a national day of thanksgiving. Since then each president has issued a Thanksgiving Day proclamation.

Psalm 148

- 1 Praise ye the LORD. Praise ye the LORD from the heavens: praise him in the heights.
- 2 Praise ye him, all his angels: praise ye him, all his hosts.
- 3 Praise ye him, sun and moon: praise him, all ye stars of light.
- 4 Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that be above the heavens.
- 5 Let them praise the name of the LORD: for he commanded, and they were created.
- 6 He hath also established them forever and ever: he hath made a decree which shall not pass.
- 7 Praise the LORD from the earth, ye dragons, and all deeps:
- 8 Fire, and hail; snow, and vapor; stormy wind fulfilling his word:
- 9 Mountains, and all hills; fruitful trees, and all cedars:
- 10 Beasts, and all cattle; creeping things, and flying fowl:
- 11 Kings of the earth, and all people; princes, and all judges of the earth:
- 12 Both young men, and maidens; old men, and children:
- 13 Let them praise the name of the LORD: for his name alone is excellent; his glory is above the earth and heaven.
- 14 He also exalteth the horn of his people, the praise of all his saints; even of the children of Israel, a people near unto him. Praise ye the LORD.

I'd like to close by reading a Thanksgiving proclamation by our first President, issued in the year of the adoption of our Constitution:

THANKSGIVING DAY 1789, BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA—A PROCLAMATION

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor - and Whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me “to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.”

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be—That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks—for his kind care and protection of the People of this country previous to their becoming a Nation—for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his providence, which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war—for the great degree of tranquillity, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed—for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted, for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of

acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions—to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually—to render our national government a blessing to all the People, by constantly being a government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed—to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shewn kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord—To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and Us—and generally to grant unto all mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.

*Given under my hand at the City of New York the third day of October in the year of our Lord 1789.*

GEORGE WASHINGTON

May God make us truly thankful this year.