

“A Moment to Decide”

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20
September 9, 2001
James R. Gorman

The story is set on the good ship *Arabella* in the year of our Lord, 1630. It was the second major crossing of the ocean by the Pilgrims of England. The first crossing in 1620 was by the *Mayflower*, which left from the city of Plymouth on the southern coast of England, spent three harrowing months crossing the Atlantic ocean and landed precisely on Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts. What an extraordinary coincidence! What were the chances of that?! There they created the Plymouth colony.

The next group to come over was the Massachusetts Bay colony under the leadership of John Winthrop. Winthrop would go on to become the first governor of Massachusetts. Not only was he the Chief Executive Officer of this voyage and the community that would settle the Massachusetts's Bay Colony, but he was also their spiritual leader. And just before they were to land, while still on board the *Arabella*, he preached one of the most famous sermons in all of American history.

It would later be published under the title of “A City Set on a Hill.” In this sermon, he would warn his flock that they could shipwreck on the rocks off the shores of Massachusetts.

But he was more worried about a spiritual shipwreck of the community which neglected the word of God and refused to act as if they first belonged to God and only secondarily were a pioneering community in this New England, looking for some good real estate investment opportunities.

“The only way to avoid this shipwreck,” Winthrop advised, “and to provide for our posterity is to follow the counsel of Micah; to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities.”

This last line ought to be deeply central to every gathering of God's people. That is the quote we ought to place in our courthouses and over our church entryways. “*We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities.*” Alas, it rarely it is. We almost never are able to abridge or limit our excesses so that the necessities of all might be supplied.

Williams continues: “We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work of our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.”

In this way, Williams goes on, “the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as his own people and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways.”

Williams, like the rest of his pilgrim brothers and sisters, believed that the behavior of the community would in some way bring delight to our God and that God will therefore delight to dwell among us; and that he shall be our God and we shall be his people. Our refusal to act rightly as a community of God’s people could in some way cause a spiritual shipwreck. But if we can find it possible to abridge ourselves of our superfluities for the supply of the necessities of others, “we shall be as a city upon a hill” and the “eyes of all people shall be upon us so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us” we shall be an utter embarrassment to all of God’s people everywhere.

Winthrop had a full sense that all the world was watching this noble experiment that we would later call democracy, which in his eyes had its roots in the idea of the covenant that God made with his own and chosen people.

Finally, in this marvelous sermon, John Winthrop concluded that there is only one way for this community of God’s people to avoid such embarrassment. And it was to listen to the counsel of “Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord in his last farewell to Israel [recorded in] Deuteronomy 30.” Winthrop saw this experiment in democracy as a New Israel in which God was doing a new thing that could collapse in embarrassment if we didn’t follow Moses’ very own advice to his own people at a time so near to Moses’ own death.

Winthrop continues: “Beloved, there is now set before us life and good, death and evil in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God and to love one another and to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments and his ordinances, and his laws and the Articles of our Covenant with him that we may live and be multiplied and the Lord our God may bless us in the land in which we go now to live. But if our hearts shall turn away so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced and worship other Gods, our pleasures and profits, and serve them, it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out the of the good land [which] we pass over this great sea to [inherit]...

“Therefore,” Winthrop concludes, “let us choose life, that we and our [posterity], may live; by obeying his voice and cleaving to him, for he is our life and our prosperity.”

I've always felt a certain kinship with this sermon aboard the *Arabella* in 1630 since one of my ancestors was aboard one of the ships sailing alongside her.

I took my mother out to Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin two weeks ago to visit the graves of her own great-great-grandparents who have her maiden name, Damuth. They were one of the first settlers out there in the 1850s and her great-great-grandmother, Elizabeth, who was born in 1808 in Vermont, had a rich heritage and ancestry. It goes something like this:

My mother's great-great-grandmother, Elizabeth, was a Tarbell whose father, Asa, married a woman by the name of Sally Dole. Her mother was Molly Page and Molly's great-great-grandparents, John Page and Phebe Payne, were aboard one of the ships that sailed with the *Arabella* under the leadership of John Winthrop and the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

So they were a part of this early experiment in Christian covenantal community. A City Set on a Hill. And I'm related to them. Along with millions of other Americans who may have forgotten this rich heritage of folks who understood their heritage not only as Americans, but as Christians who needed to figure out a way, in fear and trembling before their God, to live in this new world in a way that doesn't bring shame to their God and the community of saints that God has called to give witness to mercy, humility and justice.

And we did it off and on, half heartedly and full heartedly, proudly and shamefully, as might be expected of a human community anywhere.

And so we do today on this covenantal Sunday. "God has set before us the ways of life and prosperity, death and adversity. Therefore, choose life and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and the length of days, so that you may live in the land which the Lord has given to you from everlasting to everlasting."

Amen.

+++