

## Thank You George

Election Sunday  
November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008

It seems to me a significant irony that Election Day falls on the first Tuesday on November. Just as we are starting to turn our minds and hearts toward gratitude we are asked to join in that most divisive of all secular rituals, the national elections. This year an urgent yearning for change overshadows that sense of irony. This year we can't afford to be bemused observers. This year we share a profound disquiet, a deep concern about the state of our nation and its place in the world. At our best we experience that disquiet as a call to duty, as a call to take up again the sacred obligation citizenship can be.

True religion has always sought to speak truth to the to power; that prophetic demand is enshrined in the tradition of the election sermon. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century our puritan forbearers used the Sunday before an election as an opportunity not to endorse or condemn particular candidates but instead as an occasion to speak to the state of the union, to reiterate the vision and the values that under gird the Nation's promise and to remind the congregation of their personal and collective failure to fulfill it.

A mere fifty years after the arrival of the puritans at Plymouth and further north at Massachusetts Bay the titles of the election sermons already indicate the deep disquiet you and I feel today. John Higginson's *The Cause of God and His People in New England* in 1663, William Stoughton's *New England's True Interest, Not to Lie* in 1668, Urian Oakes's *New England Pleaded With* in 1673, Increase Mather's *A Discourse Concerning the Danger of Apostasy* in 1677 and most important to our purpose today, Samuel Danforth's election sermon delivered on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1670 and entitled *A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand Into the Wilderness*.

In 1630 before the Massachusetts Bay Colonists had even made land, their leader, John Winthrop preached a sermon on board the *Arbella*. He said in part, "We must be knit together in this work as one...We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities...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, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace." "We must be knit together in this work as one." To which "we" was Winthrop referring. He may have meant the "we" who gathered on the deck that Sunday morning. Or he may have meant the larger "we", the "we" he would probably have called God's Kingdom, which you and I know now as the Beloved

Community. Our task both as a congregation and as a Nation is still to weave together those two understandings.

There are some who, in their minds, picture those first colonists there on the deck of the *Arbella* and say “there is America.” Winthrop and his flock provide an image which for them supports that narrow “we” the we that claims America was and is and ever shall be a white, Christian, patriarchal nation, just as the founders intended. Then there are others, ourselves included, who recognize the larger sense of “we”, who see in the very gospel the colonists claimed as their first and final guide, a defining mandate for our Nation’s future. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” “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, as members of the same body.” Do you hear the echo? They were trying to live out the ministry of Jesus and to embody the values of that ministry in the “city on a hill” which they had come so far to build.

In 1956, Perry Miller, the great Harvard historian of the Puritan movement in America, brought out a book of essays entitled Errand Into the Wilderness. He took his title from the title of Samuel Danforth’s 1670 election sermon. Miller wrote: “Since Puritan intellectuals were thoroughly grounded in grammar and rhetoric, we may be certain that Danforth was fully aware of the ambiguity concealed in his word, “errand.” It already had taken on the double meaning which it still carries with us. Originally, as the word first took form in English, it meant exclusively a short journey on which an inferior is sent to convey a message or to perform a service for his superior...But by the end of the Middle Ages, errand developed another connotation: it came to mean the actual business on which the actor goes, the purpose itself, the conscious intention of his (or her) mind...Now in the 1660’s the problem was this: which had New England originally been—an errand boy or a doer of errands? In which sense had it failed? Had it been dispatched for a further purpose, or was it an end in itself? Or had it fallen short not only in one or the other but in both of its meanings? If so, it was indeed a tragedy, in the primitive sense of a fall from a mighty designation.”

We have always lived in the tension between the two meanings of that word. The colonists came to do business. They were sent by the Crown and by their investors to establish profitable endeavors in the New World. And at the same time to varying degrees they made the harrowing crossing to bring in the Kingdom, to cleanse the church of sin and falsehood and to build the New Jerusalem. Just as Danforth and his colleagues called the young nation to account in their day we also ask, how well is our still so young Nation accomplishing its errand?

What are we reaching for, as human beings, as a church community and as a Nation? What is our vision now? Has it really changed since Winthrop called us to “keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace”? Winthrop’s sermon includes intimations of the inclusive, pluralistic, integrated society we are striving to become. He and his compatriots would probably not recognize their vision made manifest in what we are becoming. But I have no doubt that love of God and love of neighbor still inform the best that’s in us.

Winthrop’s call that we “be knit together in this work as one”, is no less urgent now. These words from Unitarian abolitionist, activist, scholar and sage, Theodore Parker ring with that larger sense of we I pray that you and I and yes, the Nation will embrace. “My grandfather drew the first sword in the Revolution; my father fired the first shot; the blood which flowed there was kindred to this which courses in my veins today. Besides that, when I write in my library at home, on the one side of me is the Bible which my fathers prayed over, their morning and evening prayer for nearly a hundred years. On the other side there hangs the firelock my grandfather fought with in the old French war, which he carried at the taking of Quebec, which he zealously used at the battle of Lexington, and beside it another, a trophy of that war, the first gun taken in the Revolution, taken also by my grandfather. With these things before me, these symbols; with these memories in me, when a parishioner, a fugitive from slavery, a woman, pursued by the kidnappers, came to my house, what could I do less than take her in and defend her to the last?”

What can we do? With these things before us, these symbols, with these memories in us, what can we do. We can stand firm. We can renew our devotion to the obligations of citizenship. And we can be grateful, even and especially to those with whom we disagree most ardently. We can cultivate the discipline of gratitude.

In “Shine Republic”, Robinson Jeffers in considering democracy warns us:

“ You will tame it against it burn too clearly,  
you will hood it like a kept hawk,  
you will perch it on the wrist of Caesar.  
But keep the tradition,  
conserve the forms, the observances, keep the spot sore.  
Be great, carve deep your heel-marks.”

The poet sees the dangerous tendency for democracy to devolve into what Emerson might have called, “hollow forms.” But he admonishes us as well to conserve the forms anyway. It’s a matter of good manners. If we want good men and women to choose public life then we have a standing obligation to the rituals of recognition public service warrants. The orderly, respectful transfer of power has, since George Washington chose to step down from the

presidency after only eight years, been a proof text of our civility and of our strength. The story is told that when George the Third was informed that Washington had decided to leave office he said, "If the rumor is true he has just become one of the greatest men that ever lived."

Today I invite us all to set aside our judgment and yes, our rage at the failures and transgressions of his administration and to offer President George Bush our sincere appreciation for his years of service. So thank you George. We wish you Godspeed. We here build a "monument for the unknown good in" you and in so many others against who we've hardened our hearts. Tuesday we will make a new beginning. May it be informed by the vision and the values of the founders. May the better angels of nature guide us as we renew our covenant to seek and speak the truth, to love one another without prejudice and to respond with concerted efforts to the demands of justice.

May it be so and Amen.

Readings  
November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008  
Election Sunday'

"The Cure at Troy" (exerpt) Seamus Heaney

Human beings suffer.  
They torture one another.  
They get hurt and get hard.  
No poem or play or song  
Can fully right a wrong  
Inflicted and endured.

History says, don't hope  
On this side of the grave,  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.  
Believe that a farther shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells.

Call miracle self-healing,  
The utter self-revealing  
Double-take of feeling.  
If there's fire on the mountain  
And lightning and storm  
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing  
The outcry and the birth-cry  
Of new life at its term.  
It means once in a lifetime  
That justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme.

Holy the Firm (excerpt) Annie Dillard

...Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his Holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead - as if innocence had ever been - and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been.

“For the Unknown Enemy” William Stafford

This monument is for the unknown  
good in our enemies. Like a picture  
their life began to appear; they  
gathered at home in the evening  
and sang. Above their fields they saw  
a new sky. A holiday came  
and they carried the baby to the park  
for a party. Sunlight surrounded them.

Here we glimpse what our minds long turned  
away from. The great mutual;  
blindness darkened that sunlight in the park,  
and the sky that was new, and the holidays.  
This monument says that one afternoon  
We stood here letting a part of our minds  
Escape. They came back, but different.  
Enemy: one day we glimpsed your life.

This monument is for you.