



“A Little Band from Scrooby”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Hebrews 11 (selected verses)

November 23, 2025

With Thanksgiving this Thursday, and the first Sunday of Advent next week, today is the day we celebrate ‘Thanksgiving Sunday.’ So, I would like to begin with the Thanksgiving Proclamation sent out by our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

In this season of gratitude, we pause to remember the enduring legacy of our Congregational forebears – those early seekers of liberty and faith whose courage and conviction laid the foundation of our spiritual heritage. In their footsteps, we give thanks for the freedom to worship, to gather, and to serve as Christ's body in the world.

We rejoice in the gifts God so generously provides: the fellowship of believers, the strength of our churches, and the quiet, faithful labor of so many who give of themselves in love. We are mindful of the sacred call to be stewards of creation, caretakers of community, and bearers of peace.

Let our hearts be filled with deep and abiding thankfulness - not only for what we have received, but for the opportunity to reflect God's goodness in word and deed. May our gratitude move us to action, our joy to generosity, and our faith to greater service.

This Thanksgiving, and always, may we walk humbly, love deeply, and give thanks continually for the glory of God and the blessing of all God's people.

That Pilgrim heritage that stands at the root of the Thanksgiving celebration has particular import to those of us who gather in Congregational Churches, and while we don't necessarily dress up in black clothes and top-hats, split the women and men by sides of the room, or have a ‘sluggard-waker’ walking around with a tithing rod to poke people when they fall asleep (as I know was once a thing of the past) I think that Thanksgiving can be a good reminder to look back, now and then, on that Pilgrim story. So, I want to take some time, today, to reflect on that group of people who began worshipping in the home of Elder Brewster in Scrooby, England in the beginning of the 17th century.

This group of believers, together with their friends and peers in Gainsboro, England, had a fundamental conviction that the Church of England had compromised the basic tenets of the Christian faith. They struggled with the fact that every citizen of the country was automatically a

member of the Church, regardless of their own sense of faith. They believed that the hierarchical structure of the Church meant that the Pope, and now the King, had supplanted God as the ultimate authority in the Church. They saw that political pressures and cultural expectations had compromised the purity of the worship of the Church. Add in concerns about clergy conduct and dress, ornamentation in the worship space, and all sorts of other concerns, and you quickly discover why this small group of people, meeting secretly and irregularly for fear of persecution, were convinced that there was a better way to be the body of Christ on earth.

So, they left. In 1608 they departed England and sailed to Amsterdam, where they settled for only a year. Scarce opportunities for work caused them to move on in their endeavor and they settled in Leyden, Holland, in 1609. Those two worshipping bodies, one from Scrooby and the other from Gainsboro, were now one community in Leyden, where settled and worked for eleven years, at which point limited resources and an aging community made their final endeavor a necessity. In July of 1620, a vast majority of this community boarded the Speedwell and made way to Plymouth, England and it was two months later, in September of 1620, that these 'Pilgrims' boarded the Mayflower and set sail for the new land, the land in which they would establish the 'Congregational Way' of being the Church.

Now, many of you know already know all this, while others are at least familiar with the highlights, but I retell that story because the text that we heard this morning from the letter to the Hebrews was one that was critically important to that Pilgrim community. In spite of whatever challenges and even arguably problematic impacts may have ultimately evolved from it, the truth of the matter is that the primary motivation of that small community (who started out in the postmaster's house in Scrooby) was that passage from Hebrews. In his final words to the Pilgrims prior to their departure, their pastor, John Robinson, lifted up verses 15 and 16 of Hebrews 11 which read, *"If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better homeland, that is, a heavenly one."*

It's worth noting that the Pilgrims accounted for a third, or so, of the people on the ship. So, yes, there were many on the Mayflower who traveled for many reasons. The motivation of that Pilgrim community that began in Scrooby and landed at Plymouth Rock, however, was to discover that 'heavenly homeland' declared in Hebrews. Their goal was that through their efforts, their faith, and their community life together, they would discover that way in which the Kingdom of God could be realized, recognized, and lived anew in the real world. They were keenly aware that the things of the world - the secular pressures, the political pressures, and indeed in their case, the ecclesiastical pressures of the Church of England - got in the way of living according to God's will. Having tried any number of alternatives to address those issues in England and Holland, they reached the conclusion that the only way they could begin to realize the life as God's people they were being called to live was to separate themselves from that world as they knew it. And so, they did.

Throughout this passage from Hebrews, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews enumerates all of those great heroes of faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham... and he goes on with Moses, Rahab, David, Samuel, and others. I have to believe, however, that had the list been written some 1,700 years later, those Pilgrims would have been on the list - not because they were brave and

courageous beyond all measure, not because they were foolhardy, not because they were indifferent to the risks, but because they believed. They believed that God would bless their endeavors. They were ready to do whatever was required because they believed – they had that ‘unreasonable hope’ as we explored last week – that God would bless their journey.

Now, we live in a different age, and you and I are highly unlikely to be called to drop everything and move across the world to build that “city on the hill.” But, I think we need to hang on to that faith of the Pilgrims. We need to hang on to that fire, that image, and that dream. We of the Congregational Way need to hold fast to the conviction that a community of faith can be the light that shines in the darkness – can be the people of God in this world. We need to hang on to those moments of being together, as we were one week ago – and proclaiming that we are going rise to that moment to meet the even greater possibility of who and what we can be to this world. 100 turkeys is a great thing – but the spirit of faith and service that drives us there is so much greater!

I think we all too often miss the potential of the people of God. Another way of looking at our conversations from last week is to name that we perceive potential in the world's terms. We think of strength in numbers and force. We forget that Abraham and Sarah and Isaac were 3. Jesus and the Disciples were 13. The Pilgrims and their Mayflower companions were barely more than 100 and half of them died in the first year. The story of our faith is the recurring story of a remarkable few doing unimaginable good.

In his summary statement, the writer of that letter to the Hebrews, starting in verse 32, says people:

“And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Then, the author goes on in verse 39, saying, “*Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised...*” People get tripped up there. This seems, in the context of the chapter, to directly contradict the point that the author is trying to make. ‘*It was faith that made Abel offer a better sacrifice to God than Cain...It was faith that kept Enoch from dying...It was faith that made Noah hear God’s warnings about things in the future that he could not see...*’ The point the author seems to be trying to make is that it is our faith that gets us through, it is our faith that tunes us in, and it is our faith that sets us right with God. But, then he goes on to say that, ‘*they did not receive what God had promised.*’ What do you do with a statement that seems to claim that no matter how powerful the faith was, no matter how pure the discipleship, the promise was still not theirs? Well, you read on. “*Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.*”

The earthly promises that had been made to these people were received.

- Moses and the Israelites were safely freed from slavery and oppression in Egyptian control.

- Noah, and all of us, received the promise that God would never flood the world again.
- Solomon was made a wealthy and powerful king.
- Abraham and Sarah received the child they always longed for.

The author is not proclaiming that God's faithful did not receive the covenant promises that were made. The author is not even claiming that God's faithful did not receive the New Covenant promise that came in the grace of Jesus Christ. No! The author is explaining that they were only at the beginning.

What the author is explaining is that God's will is constantly unfolding. God's promises fulfilled to the Israelites were the promises of that part of God's story, but God's story continually unfolded as his promises were fulfilled to Abraham and Solomon, to Jesus and the Apostles, to Paul and to the early Christians, to the Early Church and even to our Pilgrim ancestors. What the author is proclaiming is that the promises of God – the will of God – is being proclaimed, through the people of God, every day of our lives.

Our Thanksgiving Proclamation reminds us of the nature of the story. *"In this season of gratitude, we pause to remember the enduring legacy of our Congregational forebears – those early seekers of liberty and faith whose courage and conviction laid the foundation of our spiritual heritage."* Can we imagine leaving our homes and loved ones, boarding a overloaded ship with the barest of provisions and crossing an ocean towards uncharted land to begin a new life? That is what they did – all in their endeavor to claim their religious conviction and freedom to worship God. They endured extraordinary hardships and disappointments; they humbled themselves before God; and they prayed.

It is in the stories like that of our Pilgrim ancestors, and many more before and even in our life today, in which we see the continued revelation of God's promises to his people. Perhaps we will not be called to go somewhere else to become that city built on a hill, but the question remains, will we be willing to take the risk? Will we stand up to face our fears? Will we hold on to that 'unreasonable hope' of our Pilgrim ancestors, and will we press forward, no matter the hurdles, in our efforts to create the Kingdom of God on earth?

When the Pilgrims sat down with their native neighbors for their celebration more than 400 years ago, they were not simply celebrating a harvest – they were celebrating the fact that, in following God's lead, God's promises had come to fruition. As they gathered around that table, they were not simply celebrating the food, they were rejoicing in the fact that, despite the pain and sorrow, despite the death and anguish, they had arrived – they had begun to build that new city on hill, where all could look and see God's glory alive. It was their work, their pilgrimage, and their sacrifices that set the foundations of the story that we embrace as our own today. In light of their story, however – in light of their efforts – as we approach Thanksgiving, I think it is right that we ask ourselves if, and perhaps even more to the point how, we will carry forward that legacy of bold faith in the unreasonable hope of God that has been handed down to us.