

# *The Royal Poinciana Chapel*

*Sermon By*

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Sixty Coconut Row, Palm Beach, Florida 33480

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## **"WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PLYMOUTH ROCK?"**

TEXT: "Therefore we must pay close attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it..."

Hebrews 2:1

I was invited to speak at the South County Road Merchant's Association in Palm Beach, the other day, a hearty group I would have to say, if for no other reason than that they gather at 7:45 a.m. to attend a meeting and listen to a minister's speech. I enjoyed it. Following the meeting James Alexander Ponce (actually everybody's friend named "Jim" spoke with me.) Ponce is the "Resident Historian" of the Palm Beach Chamber of Commerce, the Breakers Hotel, and the Life and Times of Henry Morrison Flagler. He holds the unique distinction of having been dubbed "A two legged historical landmark" by the Palm Beach Town Council back in 1996.

But anyway, after I had mentioned my walk and talk with the Plymouth Rock, (which you will soon hear a sermonic version) Jim came up to thank me and especially that I had cleared up what he called one of the few remaining mysteries in his historical prowess. The noted historian said something like (I am paraphrasing from memory) "I am glad you cleared up my puzzlement of how the Pilgrim Fathers could possibly have stepped out on to the Proverbial Plymouth Rock. When I visited up there you could hardly see it secured down in its little glass covered coffin down by the sea. It isn't much of a rock!"

"Well," I thought "Jim just made my day and gave me honorable historical credence for issuing a similar message come this Sunday morning. He was right. Today Plymouth Rock is encased in a little Plexiglas covered structure, open only to the sea. It is about the size of a

large sea going trunk, a bathtub, or a small couch in your sitting room. So whatever happened to the Rock?

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No one seems to know for sure what Plymouth Rock looked like or how large it was when the Pilgrims first anchored the Mayflower to it in 1620 and then, as the story goes, stepped out onto the Rock of the New World. I saw the actual record of the landing, from the ship's log, it mentions that the Mayflower was anchored out in the Bay and that life boats were used to ferry the Pilgrim folk back and forth to land, where their last few steps were in the surf out onto the cold wet sand.

Whatever, the Mayflower first put in on the opposite side of the Cape, at what is now Provincetown. Then, a small party went across to Plymouth, liked it, and returned to bring the others over. Then, they landed at Plymouth Rock. Although the historical details are shrouded in the misty past, a legend was born there in 1620 ... 384 years ago, that they landed on the Rock.

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I was in Plymouth, Massachusetts a few years ago and as many others, I was disappointed with the legendary foundation stone. I guess I expected to see something like the Rock of Gibraltar. What I found was a small piece of granite, locked away in a protected vault down

in the sand, with 16 stone columns supporting the roof above it. It surprised me. I promised myself I would research the subject, and I share some of that with you now.

I mentioned that we do not know how large the Rock was at the beginning. The first historical record from 1715 notes that by then, almost a century later, it was just over thirty feet long. Today it hardly makes it to six feet; i.e., 80% of its bulk is gone. The granite is uncommon to the area, an anomaly to geologists, who conclude it was most likely deposited by a receding glacier.

The Rock then disappears from view for a long time. The Pilgrims were too busy trying to survive. But, in 1771, some businessmen built a wharf over the Rock. They made tourists pay to view the Rock through a hole in the middle of the structure.

Then, in December of 1774, a group of patriots decided to relocate it to the Meeting House Square. The problem was that it took over 40 teams of oxen to pull the wagon. As they struggled to load and unload it, the Rock broke into two pieces. So, they took the top half with them, and placed it in the Square next to the elm tree. The bottom half was abandoned to the shore.

Then in 1834, the local residents thought the Rock would be safer in the new Pilgrim Hall Museum. Again, they tried to place it on a cart, but it fell and broke once more. Only the two largest pieces made it to the museum. In 1859, well-intentioned folk rejoined some pieces to the original bottom part of the Rock, still under the wharf. Twenty-one years later, in 1880, the bottom and top were cemented back together. The present memorial was built in 1920, three hundred years after the Pilgrims landed.

(Now be patient, you can't get this kind of preaching in other churches.)

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Are you asking yourself by now, whatever happened to the original Rock? Where did it go? Did some hurricane or tornado whisk it away? No... nothing like it. It was chipped or carried away to various locations.

Parts of the original Rock can be found at different spots around the world. A 100 lb. piece, e.g., is located in Immingham, England, the place from which the original group of Pilgrims fled. Several large pieces can be seen in the Conoco Refinery in Hull, Massachusetts. A 50-pound chunk is inside the Plymouth Congregational Church in Massachusetts. Some good-sized fragments are in Los Gatos, California; and one is in the Nevada State Museum at Carson City. The Smithsonian in Washington has a piece of it too.

One stone mason took a 400 pound section and made it into a doorstep in Ducksbury. Another piece, incredulously, was ground up and mixed with cement for a patio floor. Smaller pieces were carried away as souvenirs, all through the years. Some enterprising businessmen chipped off pieces and carved them into earrings and cufflinks, and who knows where they are by now? Mostly it was chiseled away, a little piece here, a little piece there.

As historian John F. Rhodes wrote: "Plymouth Rock has not been ravaged by some natural catastrophe, or by some freedom hating despot. It has been trashed by those who care about it the most. Those who desired to get a piece of the Rock for themselves have almost destroyed it." ... I wonder, as we celebrate Thanksgiving this year and thank God for our Nation whether that is a symbol of what we have allowed to happen all along the way.

And now, finally you have your sermon:

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Our Biblical text in Hebrews 2, is a perfect reminder of what I want you to think about and remember as we enter this week. The author is

informing his readers that while God spoke in many and various ways in the days of yore, he has recently spoken through his Son: "Therefore we must pay close attention to what we have heard lest we drift away from it." (Hebrews 2:1) We must pay close attention to what the Lord says, "Why?"... lest we drift away from it.

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Think about it for a minute, those first settlers in Massachusetts gave up everything they had to board the creaky little ship and cross the ocean, sold it all to seek freedom.

The Scottish and English Puritans began to revolt against the established Episcopal Anglican Church of England some years earlier. They tried hard to have a free kind of establishment where they could worship as they pleased. But Parliament refused to permit it. In their minds they had no choice but to escape from England. (Please don't tell Father Warren or your friends at Bethesda-By-The-Sea, but the Puritans slipped across the English Channel to Holland by night so they would not have to become Episcopalians!) William Bradford was their leader, as you know. One hundred twenty-five of them went to Holland and settled in Leyden.

When rumors of war became worrisome and their wanderlust not sated, they decided to come back home and then to immigrate across the wide Atlantic where they could be free of European struggles, and begin again to live and worship as they pleased. Not all of them got off the ship. Some of them refused to sign on the dotted line. Stories of wild Indians and the bitter cold of New England held others back. But about ninety-nine in all, plus crew members and passersbys looking for adventure, finally boarded the Mayflower.

At first they had another ship, too. They sold their homes in Holland and all their worldly goods, everything, to buy the "Speedwell", the ship that was to accompany the Mayflower. A

yacht owner friend of mine quips that they were not the first, or the last, to get cheated buying a boat. It leaked and they finally had to scuttle the Speedwell when they got to Southampton.

I wonder how the husbands ever persuaded their wives to crowd on board a second time with their children. There were no beds, no privacy. Rough sailors jeered and sang drinking songs during their religious services. They also tormented the women. The crossing was rough, but they finally arrived. Six died before the New Year came. At the time they were still living on board the Mayflower. Eight more were gone by the end of January, seventeen by the end of February. Half of the company died in the first winter. It was a fearsome time. Hardships untold.

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Why do you think they did it? No, don't worry about that, not too much. It is elementary; they believed in freedom so much they sacrificed everything else. Ask yourself the question: "What do you believe in enough to give up everything you have, your job, your house, your home, your all, and sell it to buy a boat to cross an unknown ocean to a desolate wilderness?" That takes commitment. Martin Luther King, Jr. once warned "until you find something you would die for, you are not fit to live."

So what would you give it all up for? They gave up everything so they could be free to worship as they pleased; so they could believe what God called them to believe and not what somebody else said they should believe; so they could worship God as they chose.

Elementary my dear Watson, but out of that devotion, a new land of the free and home of the brave was founded, a nation where all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights – among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Those are towering strengths and promises.

**But before we go, I ask you, do you see a parallel between Plymouth Rock's destruction and how those salient rights were also chipped away? What once were towering strengths, the gifts and genius of our constitution, the centerpiece of self-sacrificing Americans, our devotion to the Creator God has been chopped, chipped, weaseled, compromised away piece by endless piece. We're a long way from where we should be. Crime, drugs, immorality, dishonesty in high places. Prejudice, hate, and greed. You know that and more already...Abraham Lincoln once warned: "If destruction be our lot, we ourselves will be its author and its finisher."**

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**My point today is not the troubles, but the way they came about. No one waged an all scale battle, just one short-cut here, chip chip away in political places, looking for what I can get not give... small things... gradual changes in attitude, a small compromise in business integrity here and there, then is all begins to cave in. Then you look around and everything has changed... the Rock of our moral strength and leadership is in danger. Let's be about rebuilding them. Our greatest Thanksgiving promise should be the re-building of our spiritual moral powers. Let's be about it!**

**It also happens in communities and churches. No one ever decides to let the house of God drift. It inches away. It drifts. Someone decides not to care enough. It happens that way with people too, with marriage and family. No one I ever knew set out on their wedding day to divorce... no one sane and sober ever wages an all on battle on a home and family... usually it gets chipped away... carelessness, unkind words, selfishness, expectations untold.**

**No man ever starts out to ruin his life by being a crook or by deceiving his employees and stockholders... just a little drift here, a compromise there, a duck and a dodge here when standing upright to the truth was called for.**

**And finally, and what about you? (Are you listening?) What have you allowed to slip and drift away in your own life and strengths? What items that you once held precious is now teetering or toppling over? Where have you drifted in your love of God and your daily walk with Jesus Christ?**

**Where do you stand between where you are and where you want to be? If you don't know, discover it. If you do know, set out to correct it and live with Jesus Christ, for now and forevermore. Amen.**

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