

**“THANKS BEGINS WITH GIVING”**

Text: “O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good,  
for His steadfast love endures forever!”  
- **Psalm 106:1**

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One of the least heralded classics in American literature, and almost the sole eyewitness historical account of the events preceding, surrounding and following the crossing of the Atlantic by the Pilgrim Fathers (and mothers!) on the good ship Mayflower, was written by William Bradford, who became Governor of the Plymouth Colony for 33 years. (By the way, from his first entirely unanimous election, following the untimely death of Governor John Carver in May, 1621, Bradford, then just 31 years of age, was re-elected 30 times and served continuously until 1656, except the five years when he chose to settle back to be Vice Governor, “by importunity, got off” and took some rest.)

For all that time, Bradford was the principal leader of the Pilgrim Fathers. Historian Samuel Eliot Morrison wrote that “William Brewster, who had a university education, was Elder and leader of the church; Edward Winslow, more a man of the world than Bradford, handled the Pilgrims’ diplomatic business; Myles Standish provided the power to their politics. But Bradford was the man who made the major decisions.”

The name of the book he wrote was titled, **Of Plimouth Plantation, 1620-1647**, the official chronicle of the Pilgrims at Plimouth (later Plymouth). Many literary historians have praised it as one of the best books of the Seventeenth Century, worthy to rank with Milton, Bunyan and the King James translators of the Bible. Yet, it sits around mainly as an unread curiosity about the Pilgrims and the Mayflower.

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This Thanksgiving Sunday morning, let me begin by telling you a little about Bradford and his exceptional book, especially relating to religious matters and the courage of the people.

Bradford was historian to a very small nation, even a small colony. There were approximately 100 persons (plus crew) on board at the Mayflower when it landed on Cape Cod. Half of the Pilgrims died the first winter. Ten years later, in 1630, there were 300 people. In 1650, when Governor Bradford stopped writing, there were still less than 1,000.

The times were difficult. More than once, he wrote, “To this little band...came the awful question: How can we possibly survive?” (p.xi)

Professor Morrison concludes: “Bradford’s History is a story of a simple people inspired by an ardent faith to a dauntless courage in danger, a resourcefulness in dealing with new problems, an impregnable fortitude in adversity that exalts and heartens one in an age of uncertainty, when courage falters and faith grows dim. It is this story, told by a great human being, that has made the Pilgrim Fathers in a sense the spiritual ancestors of all Americans, all pioneers.” (Harvard, p.xii, March 1952)

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William Bradford was born in Yorkshire, England, in late March of 1590. His father died when he was one year old. When his mother re-married, she practically had to abandon William, who was then reared and raised by uncles, aunts and grandparents. He began to read the Bible on his own. He joined the Separatist Congregational Church in 1606. When he was 16, despite “the wrath of his uncles and the scoff of his neighbors,” the *proper* choices would have been either the Roman Catholic or the Episcopal Churches.

As he tells his own story, he retired then, to Holland, with the Separatist Congregationals to escape persecution from the organized church and politics in England. There, he learned Dutch on his own, mastered a little Latin and Hebrew; he accumulated a fair-sized library, which he brought with him to the New World. He owned a small house in Leyden and became a weaver.

He was 27 years old when the group departed Holland bound for New World, via Plymouth, England. In 1613, he married Dorothy May. Pity the poor woman; she drowned at sea in the deep water off of Provincetown. It appears that the crossing of the Atlantic was so rough and depressing, that when they arrived in the waters off the northeast tip of the Cape Cod, she fell overboard the Mayflower at an errant moment. Some say that perhaps she hurled herself over the side. In either case, she perished. Strange that in his book, and in all of his other writings, Bradford never mentioned the incident. Perhaps it was too loaded with emotion. He was, naturally, overcome with grief. Three years later, he married

again, Alice Southworth. They had three children together, and Alice had two of her own. It appears that they lived happily ever after.

Bradford ruled wisely, unselfishly, and well. He died on the ninth of May in 1657, leaving his house, appraised by the estate as worth \$160, a library of 400 volumes, and several other parcels of land in and around Plymouth.

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His glorious book Of Plymouth Plantation tells the story of what happened to the Separatists from those unsettling times in England, where they were treated as outcasts and infidels; how they fared in Holland after 1607; then the crossing, and finally the first few decades in the New World.

Bradford tells of their settling in, in Holland; not in Amsterdam, as you might have expected, but in the university town of Leyden (now Leiden). They tried Amsterdam for a year or so, but they saw the poverty surrounding emigrant areas of that crowded city, and they began to realize the persecution of the Established Church.

So, “they removed themselves to Leyden,” he writes, “a fair and beautiful city of a sweet situation,” even if the possibility of making a comfortable living was less of an option there. “But, being no where pitched, they fell to such trades and employments as they best could, valuing peace and their spiritual comfort above any other riches whatsoever. And, at length,” Bradford writes, “they came to raise a competent and comfortable living, but with hard and continual labor.”

They continued for many years in a comfortable condition...under the able ministry and prudent government of Rev. John Robinson and Mr. William Brewster... They lived together in peace and love and holiness. Many others came unto them from diverse parts of England, “so they grew into a great congregation.”

But, alas, after a dozen years with the death of many of their number, and with others “well stricken in years,” they saw the present dangers in Holland and the future religious unrest which was coming. The Elders determined it was best to launch out, trusting the Lord of all to guide them. Holland was much overpopulated at the time, and even the religious English were being treated as competing emigrants!

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So, Governor Bradford’s story continues... They decided to cross over to the New World. From Holland, they sailed to Plymouth, England. The Mayflower left Plymouth on September 6, 1620. Sixty-six days later, on November 11, 1620, they made their first landfall in the New World.

“The Mayflower left England with 102 passengers, including three pregnant women and a crew of unknown number...After they had enjoyed fair winds and weather for a season, they were encountered many times with cross winds, and met with many fierce storms, with which the ship was shroudly shaken and her upper works made very leaky; and one of the main beams in the mid-ships was bowed and cracked, which put them in some fear that the ship could not be able to perform the voyage.” But on they went ...

“In all this voyage there died but one of the passengers, which was William Batten, a youth, servant to Samuel Fuller, when they drew near the coast... After long beating at sea they fell with that land which is called Cape Cod...They thought themselves happy to get out of danger before night overtook them, as by God’s providence they did. And the next day they got into the Cape-harbor where they rid in safety... Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element...”

Yearly, at Thanksgiving, the Wall Street Journal publishes “The Desolate Wilderness” ... *Being now passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before them in expectations, they had now no friends to welcome them, no inns to entertain or refresh them, no houses, or much less towns, to repair unto to seek for succour; and for the season it was winter, and they*

*that know the winters of the country know them to be sharp and violent, subject to cruel and fierce storms, dangerous to travel to known places, much more to search unknown coasts.* (The Desolate Wilderness, an editorial by Nathaniel Norton)

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While the Mayflower was still moored in Provincetown Harbor, a small exploration party made its way across the Cape, and landed in Plymouth on a large boulder, which later became known as Plymouth Rock. What exactly happened is not detailed in a contemporary account by the Exploration Party, and it is not mentioned by Bradford. It was all the way to 1741 before the actual Plymouth Rock was identified as “the place where the forefathers landed,” by Elder John Faunce, then 91 years of age.

In his historical article on Plymouth Rock, John F. Rhodes tells of how, when he first visited Plymouth to search for the Rock, he expected to find a Gibraltar-like piece of granite rising from the sea. Instead, he found, as I did when we visited, a little bathtub-size rock encased in what looks more like a coffin than the pivotal monument in New England. (John F. Rhodes, quoted in the Maine Herald, November 22, 1990) Rhodes writes that he thought surely a hurricane had destroyed it, or an earthquake, or some huge cataclysmic storm, or erosion from the pounding of heavy seas and salt water. However, “No,” the guide and guard said. “It used to be a huge rock. But people have been chipping away at it for hundreds of years. It’s been moved and broken dozens of times. The American people did it to the Rock themselves.”

At the beginning, the Rock was pretty much ignored. Pilgrims were too busy with other things, like survival...The Rock is granite, but because granite is not native to the area, geologists feel it was deposited eons before by a passing glacier. For thousands and thousands of years it sat there undisturbed... Then came the Pilgrims. Then came the Industrial Society. There went the Rock.

“In 1771, some businessmen, with a commercial venture on their minds, decided to build a wharf over it. The wharf was built with a hole in the middle to allow the still huge rock to peek up through the slates.”

In 1774, just before Christmas, another group of Patriots, also with commercial gain in mind, as far as I can see, decided to move the Rock to the Meeting House Square. No one really knows who authorized the move, but they used their self-appointed tools and 40 oxen to accomplish it. The main trouble was that, as they lifted Plymouth Rock, it fell and broke into two, so now they had two pieces, top and bottom. The Patriots decided that the top part, on which the Pilgrims had presumably landed, was the more important. That seemed reasonable. So, they loaded the top half onto a cart and transported it with one-eighth the number of oxen to Meeting House Square, where they placed it next to a huge elm tree.

It sat there for dozens and dozens of years, despoiled by Pilgrim-hungry souvenir hunters who chipped small pieces away ... *just this little bit won't hurt*...The bottom of the Rock, meanwhile, remained back by the sea under the wharf.

In 1834, the people of Plimouth (now called “Plymouth”) decided that the Rock would be safer in Pilgrim Hall than in Meeting House Square. Even if not, it would bring more people into the museum. The bottom half, still deserted under the wharf, was loaded into a cart... And, you guessed it: Once again, the cart broke; the top part of the bottom piece of the rock fell and broke in two. (The Mayflower movers hadn’t learned much in 65 years.) While passersby collected the loose pieces, the two largest pieces of the top half of the bottom went on to the museum at Pilgrim Hall.

“By this time,” Rhodes wrote, “people noticed how small the Rock had become, the one on which the original Pilgrims had landed, and they wondered how they managed it.”

In a while, the people of Plymouth got tired of explaining the small size of the Rock, so they bought the wharf in 1859 and tore it down. They excavated the lower half of what was left and built a canopy around it. But, sadly, the architect who designed the canopy projected too small a covering. It didn’t fit. But rather than redesign it, they chipped the edges of the Rock so that it would fit under the canopy, rather than the other way around.

In 1880, the remaining three pieces of the original Rock were cemented together in the wharfside canopy, and the date “1620” was carved into its side.

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However, they failed to protect it and prevent tourists from taking more and more of the Rock. It was further chipped away as souvenirs through the years. And, obviously, its size continued to shrink. In 1920, on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landing, the memorial enclosure you can now see in Plymouth was built. It encloses what is left of the Rock, which lies encased in a coffin-like box. The Rock, 30 feet long in 1715, three times that in 1620, now had lost 80% of its original weight...by 1920 it was down to the Rock you can now see, under six feet, about the size of one middle-sized man. Only the people of Lilliput could have landed on it!

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In the decades of moving about, authentic parts of the Rock are reported to be scattered around the world: A 100-pound piece was apparently shipped across the wide Atlantic and resides in the courtyard of an inn in Immingham, England, the town from which the Pilgrims fled to Holland.

Several largish pieces stand at a Conoco refinery in Hull, Massachusetts. A 50-pound piece sits proudly in the Plymouth Congregational Church in Plymouth, Massachusetts. There are, curiously, even mysteriously, rather large pieces of the Rock in Los Gatos, California, in the Nevada State Museum in Carson City and, thankfully, if it were not to remain in tact in Plymouth Harbor, a nice-sized piece is in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C.

A piece of the Rock is also said to have become a 400-pound doorstep in a town just outside of Plymouth. Another piece was pulverized to become part of the concrete floor in a grocery store near Boston. Smaller pieces became cufflinks, or at least that's what the craftsman said who tried to sell them to me.

Who knows what treasury of smaller pieces, the vast majority, historians say, was taken away by thousands of curiosity seekers and collectors. They now reside who-knows-where, in drawers or jewelry boxes all round the nation. A parishioner gave me a little piece of the Rock 30 years ago (he said so, anyway), but I can't find it anymore.

So, the point is that the Rock was not destroyed by foreign despots, or the forces of nature, or stolen by enemies of the state; it has been whittled away by well-intended devoted fans, "Those whose desire to get a piece of the Rock destroyed its large and proud beginning."

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Now, some of you might be thinking, "but Reverend, where's the sermon? Nice history lesson you gave us, but I came to hear the Word of God..." "I wish you were more spiritual," a little lady wrote to me three weeks ago.

Well, as I often do, I wove the sermon in and out of the story. But for those of you who like sermons in a plainer setting, let me sketch a little summary for you in true sermonic fashion. *Here* is the sermon:

Point Number One: *Life is tough*. Like old age, it isn't meant for sissies. The passing years really can become a desolate wilderness, scary and new and awful. Once they got to the New World, they couldn't/didn't want to go back and cross the ocean again. So, they had to keep on with the program. Poor Mrs. Bradford didn't make it (I think I know why...), but others put their faces to the wind and their faith in God, even when they did not know where it was going, or what He was doing. If you aren't going to live life, what are you going to do with it?

Point Number Two: Think about the little sermon of the Rock, and what is left of Plymouth Rock. I used to quote a little poem:

*Some go down in shrapnel;  
some go down in flames;  
but most men die by inches,  
playing little games.*

Point Number Three: No one decided to let the Rock perish until it almost disappeared. It just happened. Right? Wrong. It didn't *just happen*. It was deliberate, if apparently innocent. For commercial gain, the Rock was moved twice and broken both times. For sake of what I want, for me, a little piece was chipped away here, a little piece whittled away there. We hear it all the time: "It really doesn't matter what I do, so long as it doesn't hurt anyone else." Right? Wrong. It *does* hurt everybody else. You can chip away the moral fabric and rock of a nation just as surely as Plymouth Rock.

It's like litter on the landscape: The paper cup I throw out the window of my car doesn't matter by itself, but added to 250 million others it becomes an awful clutter!

Point Number Four: When a nation fails to give thanks - and *thanks begins with giving* - it fails everything else. "O, give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, His steadfast love endures forever."

"In his later years, the Governor Bradford felt that the glory had departed from Plymouth; the town declining in number, population dispersed, young people indifferent to religion and heedless of their fathers' sacrifices, luxury coming in with prosperity, Indians growing insolent..." ( Of Plimouth Plantation, p. xxvii) Times had changed!

No doubt he was right. But, you see, Bradford was remembering the good old days. He was not remembering the first winter, when one-half of the Colony perished of starvation and the cold weather. There was so little food that each Pilgrim who was able to take nourishment received but a small, tiny, cache of corn.

The next winter, thanks to the help of the Native Americans and the industriousness of the Pilgrims, there was an abundance of food. That was our first Thanksgiving Feast, as we know and celebrate it. Other parts of the country claim a Thanksgiving prior to 1623, but I leave that to the historians.

To remind his people of their hard luck during the first winter when the next year came, Bradford placed five little kernels of corn on the table above each plate as a visible symbol of how far they had progressed and how they had been blessed by the Lord of all. The Governor issued the following Proclamation:

#### PROCLAMATION

*To All Ye Pilgrims: Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables, and has made the forests to abound with game, and inasmuch as He has protected us from the ravages of the savages and has granted us freedom to worship God, now, I your Magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims, with your wives and little ones, do gather at ye meeting house, between the hours of 9 and 11 in the day time, on Thursday, November ye 29<sup>th</sup> of the Year of Our Lord 1623; there to listen to ye pastor, and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all His blessings. Signed, William Bradford, Ye Governor of ye colony, November, 1623.*

I love the part about "Listen to ye Pastor," and "render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God." Thanks begins with giving. For now and evermore, Amen.

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