

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“A Visit from William Bradford”

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Psalm 121

A Song of Ascents.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*

*He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

*The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.*

I am most pleased to introduce myself. My name is William Bradford. I have had the pleasure of being the governor of the Plymouth Colony in what today you know as Massachusetts. Even though you are the religious descendants of the Pilgrim or Separatist people, I do not presume that you know much about me.

I was born in the year 1590 in the English village of Austerfield. Austerfield was a tiny place, a community of those engaged in agriculture. Indeed, my father was a yeoman farmer, comparatively wealthy by the standards of that village. My early life was most difficult. Both of my parents died before I reached the age of ten. To insure for my care, I was shuttled among other relatives, never staying long anywhere. First it was my grandparents, then my uncles. My inheritance from my parents at least allowed for comfortable care. I was also a somewhat sickly child. My poor health kept me from the temptations to which other youth of my age succumbed. Because I was frail, I took interest in academics and reading. I was self-taught. I especially enjoyed the reading of classic literature and God’s Holy Scriptures.

At about the age of twelve I came to the nearby village of Scrooby, a name that you perhaps find strange in sound. A young man, a friend of mine invited me to attend worship there. I was taken by the preaching of Richard Clifton. He was leading a small group of Separatists, those who wished to worship according to God and to Scripture, not according to the King and to the bishop. I was attracted to the lack of ritual and to the openness of the Bible.

Clifton called for strict reforms to eliminate all vestiges of Catholic practice from the Church of England. I returned time and time again, drawn to that tiny congregation's fervor for reform. By the age of 17 I was a fully committed member of that group. In 1606 that group formally voted to leave the Church of England.

This was a dangerous decision. Earlier, in 1603 King James I issued a decree ending church reform. Separatist leaders were hunted down and imprisoned. Some were tortured and some starved to death. My uncles and neighbors also turned upon me, trying to divert me from the beliefs I held true in my heart. We made plans to flee to the Netherlands where religious freedom was at least tolerated. Before my 18th birthday I made the decision to leave my native England to worship as I pleased. I was among 125 Separatists who took refuge in Holland.

I would remain in the Netherlands for the next 12 years. First we settled in Amsterdam, then we moved to Leiden. Leiden was a fair and beautiful city, made famous by the university there. Given the absence of sea trade, employment was much more difficult than in Amsterdam. But with hard work and continual labor, I along with many of the others made a meager living in the textile shops. In Leiden we Separatists formed a true church, led by our beloved minister John Robinson. Mr. William Brewster was called as our elder. Together we grew in knowledge and in the spirit of God. We lived together in peace and love and holiness.

In 1613 I married Dorothy May. We were blessed with a young son. My family along with the other Separatist families was facing a difficult time. We found it almost impossible to make a decent wage. We missed our native land and the environment with which to raise our children in the English tongue. The Netherlands was on the brink of war with Catholic Spain. With King James as a Dutch ally, we were harassed. Our printing presses were broken and some threw stones at us.

In 1617 our congregation decided to leave Leiden and seek sanctuary in the New World, in America. I took a major responsibility in the arrangement of the details. We had to first seek permission of the King and of his government. We had to secure proper finances. We had to find a ship and hire a crew. We had to risk a first stop in England, not knowing if we would be arrested and taken off the ship. It was difficult work but the spirit of God inspired me to be strong and patient. There was much heartache as well. Not every one in our congregation could go. The majority stayed behind with Pastor John Robinson. Dorothy and I left our four-year-old son behind. As we left Holland I wrote these words, "they knew they were pilgrims, and looked not much on those things, but lifted up their eyes to the heavens, their dearest country and quieted their spirits." It was the first time that the word Pilgrim was used to describe our group of believers. I am humbled to think that Pilgrims is the term by which you speak of us in your own day. On July 22, 1620 we left for Southhampton, England to join another group of Separatists on the ship, the Mayflower. I was one of about a dozen original Scrooby church members to be aboard the ship.

Because of my position within the group, I was forced to keep meticulous notes and papers. After all, I thought it important to record every single detail of our planning and our journey. I also thought that such records would be important for future study. From these papers I would later craft my journal, known to you today with the title *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Some consider the book a part of classic literature.

In order to finance our trip, we had to join forces with people unconnected with the church but willing to pay passage. We referred to them as "strangers." We called ourselves, "saints." Because of cramped quarters, the alliance was uneasy. There were 102 people, including several children, crammed below deck of the tiny ship. The upper decks leaked. We experienced difficult weather. Several people took sick. A main beam cracked. The "strangers" began to complain and speak of turning back. Our captain, Christopher Jones, made the courageous decision to continue. I was personally touched by hardship. My wife Dorothy fell off the deck of the Mayflower and drowned as we were anchored in Provincetown Harbor on

December 7, 1620. Throughout the years many have surmised that she brought upon her own death because she was in deep depression.

When we neared landfall we became concerned about the “strangers” demanding their own liberty and leaving our cause. We knew that we would not be arriving at our planned destination, northern Virginia. We knew that we were arriving in winter and that we needed to stay together to survive. A meeting was called and attended by nearly all of the male passengers. Both “saints” and “strangers” recognized that preservation was our paramount necessity. We spelled this out in a covenant, a document uniting us in a civil body politic. You might know of this document as The Mayflower Compact. It provided and I believe still provides for self-government based on the general good of the people.

In November of 1620, upon our landing off Cape Cod we had a frightening encounter with the Native People. This convinced us that we needed to look for a better location. A handful of men sailed north along the coastline, rowing for their lives through an icy storm but finding a harbor fit for shipping. Behind it was cleared land, an abandoned Native settlement with cornfields and running brooks. This land was Plymouth where our good people chose to come ashore, erect our first house for the common good and settle our families and our goods.

This began the worst time of our experience, a time I came to call “Starving Time.” In two or three months time, half of our company died, being weakened by the long voyage, by the cold of the winter months, and by scurvy and other diseases. All but four of the adult women in our group were dead. There was much discontent and many murmuring. Even our first governor, Mr. John Carver succumbed to the terrible illness. At his passing I was honored to be chosen as the new governor. I would remain governor of the Plymouth colony for 36 years, with the exception of five brief respites. I was re-elected over thirty times. With the wisdom and patience of Elder William Brewster, the leadership of our military commander Myles Standish, and the cheerful and willing care of friends and brethren, we somehow survived the “Starving Time.”

In April of 1621, the Mayflower sailed away back to England. It warmed my heart to see that neither one saint nor stranger chose to leave with the ship. The aid of our neighbors, the Wampanoags, provided new hope. We were able to plant crops suitable to the climate and fit our new houses against the winters, which would come. By autumn we had all things in good plenty. As Governor, I called for a celebration of our harvest; a Thanksgiving shared with our friends. This was the beginning of the holiday you observe and celebrate yourselves this very day.

In 1621, another ship, the Fortune, arrived in Plymouth. Again it was a mixed lot of saints and strangers. In 1623 two more ships brought people, some very useful persons, some the wives and children of those already here, some people so bad that we wished they would be sent home the very next day. It was up to me to provide firm leadership to hold our group together. Among the new arrivals were my son, left behind in Holland, and a young widow with two small sons, Alice Carpenter Southworth. She later became my wife. She provided a home for us and we were to have three children on our own.

Plymouth colony grew and so did my responsibilities. Along with my court of assistants, we managed all of the financial affairs. We were judges in disputes between neighbors. We negotiated with the Dutch in New Amsterdam and with the other English settlers in the new Massachusetts Bay Colony. We worked to maintain friendly relations with the Native people who were our neighbors. Perhaps the saddest part of my leadership came because Plymouth began to grow rapidly. Men and women moved out for more land. The original settlers or “old comers” had turned over the individual proprietary rights to the state. The church was divided and the old comfortable fellowship ended.

In 1650 I finished piecing together my journal, recording events diligently until 1646. I left office as governor for the final time in 1656, just a few short months before my death in 1657.

It has been said that my remarkable ability to manage men and affairs were a large factor in the success of the Plymouth Colony. Others have commented that my stamina, versatility, and vision, were trademarks of the Pilgrim adventure. Cotton Mather wrote about me saying that I was a person of study as well as action, notwithstanding the difficulties of my youth. I could see with my own eyes the Ancient Oracles of God in their Native Beauty. But the crown of all was my holy, prayerful, watchful, and fruitful walk with God, wherein I was exemplary. I believed "that all great and honorable actions are accompanied with great difficulty, and both must be enterprised and overcome with answerable courage."

Above all it was my wish to sustain the religious ideals of our Separatist community through change and through hardship. I understand that in your life of faith you are faced with similar issues. I pray that you will find the strength to endure in all of life's difficulties. I pray that you will have the patience to discover the gifts and abilities with saints and strangers alike. I pray that you will find the vision of God to inspire your work and your play as your life and your world changes. May God bless each and every one of you. AMEN.