

Penitence and thankfulness go together.

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“A Thanksgiving Crucible”

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The pilgrims’ virtue became their curse. So describes Arthur Miller in his play, “The Crucible.” A reading of “The Crucible” might become a yearly tradition along with our annual playing of Arlo Guthrie’s song, “Alice’s Restaurant,” while basting our turkey. Both help keep Plymouth Rock in perspective, with Miller’s play dramatizing what happened 40 years after the Mayflower. It’s also personal, as my ancestor lived it and got hanged for it.

There’s nothing wrong with Muslims obeying sharia law or Jews faithful to the mitzvahs, the commandments. There’s nothing wrong with Christian fundamentalists wanting to regulate governmental school prayer. Just don’t require that I to have to obey or believe the same. Just don’t think religious laws supersede Constitutional law.

Voicing similar theological principles as Lincoln’s first National Thanksgiving Proclamation, John Mackay, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, released before Thanksgiving 1953, his “Letter to the Presbyterians.” This demonstrated the worthy and bold church of conscience upon which I, literally, was nursed. Mom found it amusing and prophetic how during my baptism, infant me grabbed the pastor’s preaching tabs and wouldn’t let go. Did the Reverend Harold Scott chuckle? Mackay’s letter, warning against “fanatical negativism,” publicly confronted McCarthyism, yet another example of an outbreak of extremist madness. Mackay, having witnessed as a missionary in South America the ruin caused by the secular religion of communism, warned how in hating a system we mustn’t allow ourselves to hate individuals or whole nations. Mackay warned how combating one totalitarian system with another dooms us for disaster. Mackay warned how democracy, through fear and in the name of expediency, can run the danger of succumbing to the same evils we oppose. Mackay proclaimed how, “The majesty of truth must be preserved at all times and at all costs.”

“Let the church be the church” became his mantra, for he saw how God’s invisible spirit exercises sovereignty throughout human history whenever the moral divine will is manifested as the practical pattern for our way with each other and whenever Lincoln’s “terrible visitation” happens when we don’t. Sovereignty works inside-out through faithfulness. Penitence and thankfulness go together.

40 years provided sufficient tinder for the pilgrims to heat a crucible of self-defined righteousness.

The pilgrims differed from the other colonies of that era. Saint Augustine was a Spanish military outpost, from which Roman Catholic Spain eventually massacred French Huguenots who sought refuge in Florida. The Dutch parceled out the Hudson Valley to entice rich landowners and establish fur trading posts with the French farther north, until the English kept sending colonists and took over the region. The passengers aboard the ships disembarking at Jamestown sought riches, then sailed back to England, at least until Lord Baltimore eyed the Chesapeake as his chance for wealth. Wealth explains those privateers who navigated and hunted along America’s coastline and throughout the West Indies (including another of my ancestors, who did not get hanged but got promoted). Of course, it’s not as if the locals were consulted.

None of these came to these shores to build the New Jerusalem. Whereas, writes Miller, Virginia killed off the Jamestown profiteers, the severe test to survive bleak Massachusetts made the pilgrims defensively self-reliant, defiant, cohesive, hard-working, self-denying, and, periodically, fanatical. Miller notes how the church appointed patrols to arrest those rowdies who tried to duck church attendance. Their creed prevented any form of godless, frivolous entertainment because all entertainment was a vain enjoyment. These pilgrims came neither for furs nor tobacco but to establish a theocratic foothold onto the "last place on earth to pay homage to God." Their struggle to build this New Jerusalem gave them a justification born from grievance, leading to stern superiority. "They who were denied freedom of worship would deny that to anyone else, no deviant sects were allowed." They who had been persecuted claimed a right to persecute those who disagreed with them or refused to conform, "lest the New Jerusalem be defiled and corrupted by the wrong way and deceitful ideas." Small people need retribution. What a sad, gospel inconsistent life, always needing enemies.

They had the driving purpose and conviction of divine destiny: to bring light into the world and goodness into the wicked wilderness, whether or not it was wanted. And so the Salem witch trials – spawned by vengeance, fear, deceit, greed, and perverted piety -- took place 40 years after Plymouth Rock, thus fulfilling the inherent sin of theocracies and all forms of totalitarianism.

Keep a weather eye out for the madness of righteousness.