

Thanksgiving Sunday
Rev. Nancy Rockwell
November 20, 2005

“Stick not fast where Luther and Calvin have left you, but press on, guided by the Holy Spirit, for there is yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s holy word.”

It was 385 years ago, September 16, 1620, when Rev. Jonathan Robinson closed a brief sermon with these words. He was speaking to the departing Pilgrims, his congregants, on the dock in Scrooby, England. Robinson was the Pastor who inspired his small flock to leave Holland and begin this adventure in America which you and I are still engaged in. His health kept him from making the voyage with his flock, he’d had pneumonia and was judged not up to the trip, and his plans to come a year later were ended by his death. So beloved a pastor was he that his collection of books were brought over a dozen years after his death and became the first library at the brand new Harvard College.

His spirit seems forever contemporary as it lifts from his words to our ears, and I am more and more moved by the direction he set for us. It used to seem to me that the essential thing was, he freed us up from Luther and Calvin, who were great and fierce liberators in their day, but not the sort of fellows you want to be stuck with forever. But far more important I now think, is that he set us into an eternal journey of questions, he urged us to have minds that never say, *There now, that’s settled!*

The Pilgrims are often characterized as a group of people looking for freedom of worship, but that is really untrue – the Pilgrims had complete freedom of worship in Holland, what they lacked was good jobs and property. Because they couldn’t speak Dutch very well they lacked access to all but menial jobs, were quite poor and lived in inferior housing – the story of immigrants in every age. After twenty years their own sons were choosing to assimilate, marrying Dutch girls, going to the Dutch Reformed Church, and taking jobs in the Dutch army, in service to the Dutch king. The Pilgrims disliked kings, so much that their English translation of the Bible had removed all the King words for God and substituted things like Maker, and the Great I Am and Divine Original. King James II of England was infuriated by this, so much so that he called together a Council of 40 scholars and funded them to make an official translation – the King James Bible -- putting all the king words for God back in.

Well. That became the stuck point for quite a while. But in other respects the settlers of Plymouth and Boston were freer, the Holy Spirit being so much their guide that they took time in worship to hear the story of each member’s journey of faith as the ritual for joining – aren’t you glad we’ve given that up? Yet I, for one, would say that being part of a community of faith increases my ability to discern holiness in my life and in this world. Rev. Shepherd of the Cambridge church was the only pastor who took notes of these testimonies, and we look to his records for a clue to them all: for example, he tells of a woman speaking about watching a spider weave a web and coming to believe in the

goodness of God because of the brilliance of the design and the patience and art of the spider, and then coming to think that God, who had done all this for a spider, had also blessed her as well. Some stories are sadder, lonelier, less sure. Some are phlegmatic and certain. In other words, they were like us.

The journey of faith has never been easy, nor has discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit been sure. The Pilgrims walked up the gangplank of the Mayflower only to discover that Squire Weston (the same Squire Weston who appears in Fielding's novel *Tom Jones* was owner of the Mayflower) had, without their knowledge, recruited a number slightly larger than their own to be part of the Plymouth colony, people who were not religious at all or who went to the Church of England. Weston was suspicious of the Pilgrim religion.

Entering the new land has, from the entering the boat, required making friends with strangers. And from the beginning the theme of the journey has been the desire to leave home in order to search for home.

It is no surprise, then, that the central American myth, and the most watched movie in the world, is the Wizard of Oz, that magical tale about leaving the dull gray world of Kansas and entering into the Technicolor dream world of Oz, that story about leaving the world of Uncle Henry and Aunt Em, who are Luther and Calvin almost to a T, and following the yellow brick road that leads into the illusion and disillusion of the Emerald City and finally to the realm of the Good Witch who invites Dorothy into Oz in the first place and who now tells her that home is within her, not at the end of the journey but within her all along. The Good Witch, like God and Pastor Robinson, encourages our journeys but does not control them.

I do actually know a man named Jonathan Robinson, he lives in New Orleans. His nickname is Toto, and he has a dog named Dorothy, which of course makes me think that not only Native Americans but also animals would like to rewrite the stories that we tell.

Not sticking fast, not getting mired down in our stories, is so important, because there is always another point of view out there. And in the life of the spirit, which is the life we share with God, there is always a new land to enter, an invitation to move into Technicolor living, where we will learn more than we ever imagined, be scared, feel lost, get mad, be disillusioned, and share love. Plimoth Colony, Oz, each of our lives, all are adventures like this, invitations like this.

Another great adventure, guided by the Spirit, is modern science. Modern science was one of the great fruits of the English Puritan Reformation. There was, of course, much science prior to that, and great scientists, such as Copernicus, Galileo. But they were unique geniuses. The English Reformation emerged intellectually from Cambridge University, which became the center for scientific inquiry in this new age of Enlightenment, an atmosphere of religious and scientific inquiry encouraged by mutual support, in which smart folks who were not geniuses could work together and pool their findings to increase the light in the world.

In our time, when the hostility between the heirs of Calvin and Luther and the heirs of Darwin and Einstein is great, when the accusation Wicked Witch hangs in the air on both sides, we need to remember the exhortation of Pastor Robinson, to press on, confident of more light and truth that lies ahead of us, not behind.

The Bible has never been a scientific book. Even its earliest authors and their readers understood that. How can I make such a claim? Within its copious pages there are instructions about honoring the land and giving away a tenth of your harvest, but there are no instructions about agriculture, about how to grow crops and how to fend off crop blight. There are no instructions about breeding livestock, though the stories of sheep and shepherds are endless, there are no veterinary stories about tending to sick animals or saving weak ones, there are no medicinal stories about curing fevers, or pulling teeth, or easing indigestion after the feasts, and you know they had to have a lot of lore about these things. There are no instructions for how to build a house or a plow.

The Bible is a book about the meaning of things, and about the presence of God with people. The creation story points to the goodness of God and the earth, and how that goodness is fused as blessing within everything that is. Which is easy to believe till you get on the boat and find a colony of strangers in your space, and no way of going back. Then you really need to work at finding that blessing.

Darwin's voyage on the Beagle was a journey like this. Once, about ten years ago when I was in England for a conference, I made a side trip to Darwin's house at Down. I made the trip because of a course I had taken that year with Stephen Jay Gould, in Darwinian evolutionary biology. Gould loved the history of science a lot, so he put it in every class. I learned so much that isn't in the *Origin of Species*, a book I have read but do not claim to have mastered. I learned that Darwin's father was a devout Episcopal doctor in Victorian England, an era of patriarchal religion and reverence for kings. There is a huge portrait of his father on the living room wall there. Darwin was a constant disappointment to his father, flunking out of school after school. And Darwin's grandfather, whose name was Erasmus was a scientist and agnostic who doted on his grandson. Tensions all over the place between these three. There's another huge portrait of Erasmus Darwin at Down House, on a study wall.

Why are there no women in this family, I wondered as I walked around, and in a glass covered case I found two small cameos of Darwin's mom and wife. His mom died when he was pretty young, so for significant years it was a family of men, living in a very orderly world, with the only overt chaos being teenage Charles' life. Darwin's voyage on the Beagle was a kind of last resort for a boy who wouldn't fit into professional Victorian England and so was sent off with the captain, who drank too much and had some kind of fits.

In the Galapagos Darwin found his Technicolor world, his Oz, his adventure of the mind and spirit. And then he came home to the gray world of Down house. For 24 years he sat in his chair – the chair is still there -- 24 years in which he married, went to the Episcopal

Church every Sunday, wrote small essays but no large work, and was ill a great deal of the time. But when he finally wrote the Origin of Species, when he rose and spoke, his testimony began to change all our thinking. And we are still listening for the light and truth that is contained within his words.

In short, what Darwin told us is: *I guess we aren't in Kansas anymore.* This world is so very different than we had imagined, and one of the things we will see differently if we look with Darwin's eyes, is our image of God, whose only real biblical name has always been, *I Am Who I Am Becoming.*

In the end there is only one boat, Spaceship Earth, whose other name is The Ark. And we are all part of the voyage, looking for the promised land, our True Home. And the journey is everything. We are invited into the banquet of its questions. May we press on. Amen.