

In Good Company
Sermon by Ken Rockwell for January 19, 2020

It's Anniversary Sunday at First Congregational Church, and we find ourselves in a strange situation, with no settled pastor, and uncertainty as to when we may have one again.

But, you know what? We are in good company. Imagine yourself back 155 years in old Salt Lake City. You're part of a small but growing number of Protestants residing in the "City of the Saints" without the benefit of any regular worship services. You've just gone through the Christmas season remembering how it was back in the old home town in the East. Not much of that here. The Mormon pioneers have the only organized religion in town, and that's not exactly your "cup of tea."

But one January morning you see notice of a meeting coming up. A Protestant minister is going to actually give a sermon at a business office on Main Street. The Reverend Norman McLeod had been brought to town as a chaplain for the soldiers at Camp Douglas, and he's offering his services to the civilians in town as well. OK, so he's a Congregationalist, and maybe you're a Methodist, or a Presbyterian, or an Episcopalean... Oh well, he'll do for now.

So for a time, the Protestants of various kinds all meet together under Reverend McLeod's spiritual guidance. It's good to have a religious community again on Sundays. But the accommodations are limited for the growing number attending. So they pool their resources and raise the funds to erect a meeting house. They're successful, and complete the building in 1866. They call it Independence Hall, and it's the first religious structure in town not associated with the Latter-day Saints. They all meet together under one roof.

Still, there's the yearning for one's own remembered ways, a desire to organize a church with the familiar traditions and rites you remember from back home. So as they grew in numbers, the members of each denomination began to form their own societies and arrange for procuring the services of a clergyman of their own church. Then they raised their own houses of worship. One by one, Independence

Hall gave birth to various churches of different flavors, until only the Congregationalists were left. They, too, built a new church building in 1890.

That longing for a pastor of one's own tradition, which the non-Mormons of Salt Lake went through, worked itself out with eventual happy arrangements. But their difficulties in the meantime pale in comparison with what our spiritual forebears went through in early Plymouth Colony. It's appropriate to remember those pioneers in this 400th anniversary year of the sailing of the Mayflower and the founding of New England.

The leaders of that effort were members of the Separatist congregation of Pastor John Robinson. They'd been gathered for several years at Leyden in Holland, to which they'd gone as exiles from their native England. Determined to make a new start on English soil but beyond the reach of their oppressors back home, they made arrangements to cross the Atlantic and found a colony in America.

But when it was time to depart, Pastor Robinson stayed behind, hoping to come later. So as the emigrant band set up their new home in the Cape Cod region, they had no pastor to lead them. Their spiritual care was entrusted to the Elder William Brewster. He was the tenant in residence at the Manor of Scrooby in Nottinghamshire, where the core of this Separatist community first came together. With some education at a college in Cambridge, Brewster had gained some aptitude with biblical languages. He had given up his comfortable living to go into exile with John Robinson and the others, and now he helped to keep this pilgrim band together in very uncertain times.

And no time was more uncertain than that first year, starting with a winter of hunger and sickness. William Bradford, the colony's governor, recalled decades later how the sickness came upon them and the settlers started dying, sometimes two or three a day. "And of these in the time of distress, there was but 5 or 7 sound persons, who, to their great commendations be it spoken, spared no pains, night nor day, but with abundance of toil and hazard of their own health, fetched them wood, made them fires, dressed them meat, made their beds, washed their lothesome clothes, clothed and unclothed them; in a word, did all the homely and necessary offices for them which dainty and queasy stomachs cannot endure to hear named; and all this willingly and cheerfully, without any grudging in the least, showing herein their true love unto their friends and brethren." And first among these was the Elder William Brewster.

Bradford summed up the career of William Brewster after his passing: “He would labor with his hands in the fields as long as he was able, yet when the church had no other minister, he taught twice every Sabbath, and both powerfully and profitably, to the great contentment of the hearers, and their comfortable edification. He did more in this behalf in a year than many that have their hundreds a year do in all their lives. … He had a singular good gift in prayer, both public and private, in ripping up the heart and conscience before God, in the humble confession of sin, and begging the mercies of God in Christ for the pardon of same.”

And, describing Brewster’s character, Bradford wrote that “He was wise and discreet and well-spoken, having a grave and deliberate utterance, with a very cheerful spirit. He was very sociable and pleasant among his friends, of an humble and modest mind and a peaceable disposition, under-valuing himself and his own abilities and sometimes over-valuing others. He was innocent in his life and conversation, which gained him the love of those without as well as those within; nevertheless, he would tell them plainly of their faults, both public and privately, but in such a way that it was usually well taken.”

So William Brewster fulfilled several of the responsibilities that we would expect of a pastor, but he couldn’t do everything. In particular, he was not authorized to administer the sacraments of Baptism or the Lord’s Supper. He also did not officiate in marriages, but that wasn’t due to not being ordained. For the Separatists had adopted the practice of their Dutch hosts, and considered marriage a civil function that was left to magistrates—civil officials like the governor.

So the Plymouth church got through those first years under Brewster’s leadership, but always looked forward to the arrival of their beloved pastor, John Robinson. So imagine the deep sorrow that descended on the community when, in the winter of 1626, they received the news that Robinson had died in Leyden. There would be no sweet reunion in this new land.

And still they waited. It was not until 1629 that the Plymouth church received its first settled pastor. That makes Nine years without a pastor. Nine years! How did they manage to carry on? I’d think it would have been easy to give up on this

difficult endeavor, yet still they persisted. Along with William Brewster's leadership, there was also the strength of their faith.

This faith including the memory of the words of John Robinson in his farewell sermon before the sailing of the Mayflower, that "the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word."

And there is the abiding promise in the words of Jesus the Christ, in a verse that has become the watchword of the Congregational Way: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matt 18:20)

So today, in our own hour of uncertainty, let us keep these words of hope and promise in mind. If it be God's will, this church, which was the mother of all Protestant churches in Salt Lake, can be the means by which the Spirit can bring more light and truth into this valley. And so long as we remain together, we can be assured: the Lord is present with us.

We are in Good Company, indeed!

Amen.

Scriptures:

Psalm 102: 11 – 17

Ephesians 3: 14 – 21