

“A City Upon a Hill”
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Matthew 5:13-16*

While in France, Benjamin Franklin often played chess with an elderly duchess. Once, after he put her king in check, and taking it, she reprimanded him by saying, “We do not take Kings so.” Franklin responded matter-of-factly, “We do in America.”

One evening George Washington sat at the table after dinner. The fire in the fireplace was too large and hot. He complained and moved. A gentleman observed to Washington that it behooved a general to stand fire. Washington replied, it did not look well for a general to receive fire from behind.

I heard about this nursery school teacher last week preparing for the Fourth of July weekend. She took this opportunity to tell her class about patriotism. “We live in a great country,” she said. “One of the things we should be happy about is that in this country, we are all free!” One little boy came walking up to her from the back of the room. He stood with his hands on his hips and said... “I’m not free, I’m four!”

On this Fourth of July weekend, let’s remind ourselves about our past – for our present and future.

“Thus stands the case between God and us. We are entered into a Covenant with Him for this work... The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways... We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when he shall make us a praise and a glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “The Lord make it likely that of New England? For we must consider that we shall be as a City Upon A Hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”

So declared Puritan John Winthrop in 1630 to those embarking with him to the new world – America. John Winthrop, an idealist, fervently praying for, and working toward the complete reformation in his homeland England – feels led to travel across the ocean, to settle in New England, and to complete God’s reformation of God’s church and children.

Winthrop was convinced that all the civilized world would be watching them – this “city upon a hill” in New England. They would exhibit to all – the fulfillment of God’s covenant with humanity. Their light would shine brightly and convert his England and more!

My friends, without doubt the Puritans of the 17th century have formed our American culture and psyche. No doubt, reaction as well as evolution has molded our nations culture since the 17th century – but all interpretation has been predicated on the Puritans of New England.

Author Francis Bremer has written a biography on John Winthrop, calling him, “America’s Forgotten Founding Father.” For Winthrop believed (as did his fellow Puritans) that they were on an errand to rebuild a godly, moral society for all the world to see.

However much, we have secularized and deconstructed Winthrop’s vision – this American ideal of building a moral (if not godly) society remains deeply embedded in our psyches.

Winthrop knew his bible and used it well. He had a vision of an ideal community in a new promised land. A lawyer, scholar and religious man, devoted to his family and church – a man of his time, for good and ill – yet a moderate by all accounts.

Massachusetts Bay Colony would become that “City upon a Hill” – shining before man, where all could see their works and glorify God! Winthrop’s vision, primary among those good works, was the obligation of individuals to “give back” to the society that enriches and sustains them, through thick and thin, through good times and difficult times – the “City upon a Hill” must give back in order to fulfill its obligation, its responsibility to its divine covenant! Perseverance is a necessity for all generations! Historian Neil Baldwin’s book, The American Revelation, Ten Ideals that Shaped Our Country From the Puritans to the Cold War, begins his narrative with John Winthrop. **Winthrop’s vision of such a “City upon a Hill” – a beacon of dignity, freedom, individualism, and community (to name a few) – must remain with us and challenge us – even today!**

Of course, America today has greatly changed, and yet certain ideal must endure.

Today’s City upon a Hill is a “**Cosmopolitan City Upon a Hill**”. And with this comes creativity and concern. Defining this “City upon a Hill” must make use of our history, which includes this ideal of fulfilling this covenant – **of human dignity, freedom, rule of law, and justice for all peoples.**

This Cosmopolitan City upon a hill – includes multi-ethnic, racial, religious peoples. Yet recognition of our Judeo/Christian Founding, along with openness to other faith traditions coming on board – is absolutely necessary for our “City upon a Hill”.

Neither the extreme left or right must be allowed to define or redefine us as a nation, as a culture. We must, as citizens – know our history and involve ourselves in our future.

I recently officiated at a wedding near Hazleton. At the reception I was seated at a table where the others around the table were all related. They were delightful and fun to be with. The aunt was Roman Catholic. One couple recently joined the Lutheran Church. Another couple are members of an Assembly of God Church. The wife introduced them as Born Again Christians.

Cosmopolitan!

Two weeks ago Shawn and I had the delightful opportunity of attending Temple Israel’s annual dinner at the Woodlands. Attorney Joe Savitz was being honored. He had requested that Shawn and I sing for the occasion. Of the songs we sang, they included “Jerusalem of Gold” (in Hebrew) and “Let there be peace on Earth.”

- We had a glorious time!
- Shared ideals, values!

Cosmopolitan!

This past Friday I had lunch with Rabbi Kaplan and Dr. Fahmy, to prepare for an event in mid-July at the J.C.C. on interreligious understanding.

Cosmopolitan.

John Winthrop went back to his Bible – to express the Puritan vision of a city upon a hill. Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount continue to ring in our ears. Human responsibility is taken very seriously by Jesus. These few verses testify to such.

You are the salt of the earth! That You is emphatic in the Greek text and plural.

“It is you” - you are the salt of the earth!

Be careful – if the salt gets impure (mixed with dirt and other elements), it is useless!

Do not become useless!

The Puritans took this to heart – as a community under a covenant. **Responsibility. It’s up to all of you!**

You are the light of the world! A city on a hill cannot be hidden! (Jerusalem is on a hill!) Sometimes we need an enlarged vision! Something much larger than ourselves!

The City upon a Hill cannot be hidden!

All can see what's going on in the City!

That's the way it must be.

Self-correcting.

Self-examining.

Never self-absorbed, but always with a vision worthy of emulation.

I believe America with its imperfections remains a City upon a Hill – a light to struggling peoples and nations – yearning for freedom and democracy. John Winthrop's vision must remain a driving force for this nation of immigrants!

God Bless America, and God Bless all nations devoted to the high ideals of freedom, human dignity, the rule of Law, and democracy.

Amen