

Vision for Provision

Sunday, December 6, 2015; Philippians 1:3-11

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I has been said often that the Lord will provide. While I believe without a doubt that God does provide for us, I also believe that our understanding of God's providence, our vision for provision, is quite often mistaken, cloudy, or darkened. A good example of this blurry vision comes from our spiritual ancestors, the Pilgrims, whom we remembered recently in our holiday of Thanksgiving.

These English Separatists sailed into the Massachusetts Bay and ultimately settled at a location they called Plymouth. The site that these weary travelers chose was picked by them as it was the site of an abandoned Native American village, with land around it that had already been cleared. Upon seeing the open land, populated only by piles of human bones of those who had once lived there, the Pilgrims rejoiced, seeing this as God's providence *for them*.

We know now that European diseases to which Native Americans had no immunity were the cause of the devastation of the village where the Pilgrims settled. In the ten years prior to their arrival, it is estimated that somewhere between 30 to 90% of the native population in the region was wiped out by the plague of disease. The Pilgrims interpreted the piles of bones around them not as some mysterious tragedy, however, but as signs of God's providence for them: God *caused* the land to be cleared and depopulated *for them*.

Only a few years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, thousands of other English colonists streamed across the ocean and settled in and around Boston. These folks, the Puritans, had a more extreme vision of God's provision. They saw *all* the land, inhabited or not, as God's provision for them. It was a new Promised Land, and they, like the Israelites in the time of Joshua, were called to enter

the land, claim it, and subdue or vanquish the “Canaanites” who dwelt there.

When some of these Puritans along with their Pilgrim cousins established a new colony in the Connecticut River valley, settling at Windsor, Hartford, and Weathersfield, they came with this sense of divine entitlement, and violence between the colonists and their Indian neighbors erupted almost immediately. Violent acts led to acts of greater violence until war broke out between the Connecticut colonists and the Pequot tribe. This ended with the annihilation of the Pequots as a people by Colony of Connecticut. Their land, which was most of the eastern part of our state, was claimed by the colonists through conquest; tribal members who did not die in the war were forced to be taken by rival tribes, and so were removed from the land. Even their name, Pequot, was no longer allowed to be used. At the end of the war, the Puritans called for a day of thanksgiving as they saw these terrible acts as yet another clear sign of God’s providence *for them*.

European colonization and American actions against native peoples has caused a great deal of suffering over the centuries. The ongoing effects of violent and unjust acts can be seen in the great poverty and hopelessness that is today part of many Native Americans’ experience. It can also be seen in the great wealth that we who dwell in these lands enjoy. While there are no mulligans in life, and we can never undo the past, we can recognize the sins of our spiritual ancestors, learn to develop a clearer vision for God’s provision, and be dedicated to helping and providing for those who have suffered injustice and loss. We can have renewed vision through rebirth. Fortunately, we Connecticut congregationalists have had several rebirths since the time of the Pilgrims and Puritans and we have become dedicated to serving Christ through giving, not taking, and by our acts of peacemaking, not violence.

Spiritual rebirth is what we celebrate today in the sacrament of baptism. We remember that we are created anew by God, that the inadequacies and errors that may have defined us in the past are gone, buried, washed away, and that we are made new to experience God's goodness around and in us. The provision of God—forgiveness, renewal, and the indwelling presence of the divine—is what we celebrate today in the sacrament of communion, recognizing that we are fed by God through Christ a spiritual food that perfectly provides for us. We remember that we are united with Christ and one another and can therefore enjoy in this Advent season hope, peace, joy, and love. We are so filled with these good gifts, the presents of God that come with the presence of God, so that we may share them with others and be agents of God's blessing in the world. God will provide to you, and God will provide through you.

God will never promise you land or other material prosperity. If you have those blessings, great, they can be used by you to bless others, but they are not part of God's plan of provision for you. Consider the apostle Paul, author of today's reading. Although he wrote his letter to the Philippians from a Roman prison, he writes that he is full of thanksgiving, joy, and God's grace. Paul did not have material wealth—in fact, quite the opposite as, for the sake of the gospel, he was impoverished and imprisoned. Or consider Jesus our homeless Lord, who gave everything he had, including his own life, for others. As he was crucified, his only possession, the clothing that he wore, was taken away from him. And yet, even as this naked, humiliated, possessionless prophet gave his life on the cross, he remained full of God's life. Upon the cross, he offered a prayer of forgiveness for those who put him there, he gave a blessing of hope for a criminal dying next to him, and he taught his disciple to provide for his mother. In his suffering, God provided, and through his suffering, God provided.

Niether Jesus nor Paul had material wealth, but we do not consider them to be cursed by God. No, even in their trials and suffering, they were blessed by God. What made them strong was their clear vision for God's provision of blessing. They knew the empowering, life-giving presence of God in their lives, and that was enough.

Do you need this provision today? Could use a little empowerment or blessing of life? Thanks be to God, this is given to you this day and every day. Clear your vision that you may see beyond any material wants and recognize the fullness of God's grace in your life. And dedicate yourself to be an agent of God's blessing. Go Santa-style, sharing the gifts of God all the children of God around the world. In so doing, you will continue the work of Christ to bring forgiveness, renewal, and peace to a war-torn and weary world.