

FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF CHANGE

I am glad 2020 is over. I bet the Pilgrims felt the same way in early 1621. After their perilous journey in 1620, which wasn't quite as comfortable as the Queen Mary, and with lives lost during the crossing, the shining shores might not have seemed that shiny. We've had bad losses in our own 2020-21 and now there is light and hope ahead. As lifelong Congregationalists, Bobbi and I have been blessed finding Plymouth. I'd gone on a European tour with my Dad and met two older women from the Heights who were members of Church of the Pilgrims and had come to Plymouth through that combination. They were cheerleaders. We were looking at moving, likely to Brooklyn Heights, and Plymouth was the clincher.

How very different our faith is from that of the Puritans. They came for religious freedom and tolerance, but wouldn't give it to their own people. They argued over arcane issues like predestination and whether you could work against original sin. Anne Hutchinson was banished from Massachusetts Bay for her heretical beliefs. She came to Portsmouth, Rhode Island, my father's ancestral home, around 1630. She later left for what is now Westchester County, and was massacred by native Americans. She is probably more well known for her namesake, the Hutchison River Parkway, than for the issues she fought for or against. My hometown, Little Compton, RI, had a problem too. Founded by Colonel Church, the famous Indian fighter in the King Phillip Wars, in the 1680's, the town neglected to get a minister. Forced by Plymouth Colony, they finally found Richard Billings at Harvard in 1704 and were ever saved from damnation.

As a denomination, we have been at the center of controversy after controversy. Essentially the Massachusetts colonies were Theocracies, combining government and religion as one. Current views of this

arrangement bring images of Iran at its worst or Spain during the inquisition. Disestablishmentarianism was later. Getting the state out of religion. But many were “anti.” The movement is now only mildly famous because it is said to be the longest word in the English language. Next came the fight with the Unitarians over the Trinity. Amherst was founded as a result. Then came whose side to be on during the Revolutionary War, followed by slavery during Beecher’s time. Do you get why we cherish debate and discussion? It’s in our DNA.

I have seen a lot of change in my one-fifth of the 400 years of American Congregationalism. But, also a lot of enduring traditions and values. In Little Compton we had to decide whether to join the United Church of Christ. How could we, the very meaning of our faith was being able to write our own covenant with God. How would you submit yourself to someone else’s judgment? We rejected the idea. All deacons in the 1950’s were men and old ones at that. They acted as ushers, mainly to make sure no one took a seat spoken for by someone else. The minister didn’t wear a robe. Communion was served by men. Women taught Sunday School as they did elementary school. Women began filling some of those roles by the late 1950’s. I’d never heard of Advent until Plymouth. There were no services for Christmas. In fact, in colonial New England children went to school on Christmas. But guess what, we had a service on Thanksgiving. Services in those times had much more patriotic music. America; Onward Christian Soldiers; The Battle Hymn of the Republic, written by Julia Ward Howe, also of Portsmouth, RI. Some of these are kind of non-PC, but we sang them with great gusto.

Now, no one thinks much about whether women or men fill any role. Women don’t wear hats and men have largely shed coats and ties. Of course, not for funerals. These changes are widely accepted. In another

marked shift, the all-fearing God of earlier generations has become an all-loving God.

I think it is fair to say that the religion of the Pilgrims bears scant relationship to our faith today, except its focus on God and Christ. Our modern services are much more inclusive and inviting. A feature of our current Congregationalism is its willingness to accept people at all places on their faith journey. I couldn't imagine a better way to be inviting, especially in this era of secularism.

Can you imagine how much our faith will change in the next four hundred years? I can't. While it will change in many ways, I think it will remain God and Christ centered. And, I know one thing—it has been relevant to me my entire adult life.

~ Dick Davis