

“A city built on a hill”

Sermon for the Montgomery Clericus

October 1, 2024

Matthew 5:13-16

“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 glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “may the Lord make it like 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.**” When John Winthrop wrote these words aboard the *Arabella* while sailing to the Americas in 1630, he surely did not image how these words would be used 400 years later. Winthrop was certainly not writing a sermon to articulate the purpose of founding a country.

In fact, Winthrop’s words were forgotten until the 1800’s when they were published by a historical society. Even then they went unnoticed until the 1950s when the historian Perry Miller grabbed hold of them while searching for an origin story of America. In Winthrop’s sermon, Miller was able to ground a story of the creation of America as the climax of the Protestant Reformation, as the crescendo of World History. America at its founding had a purpose of putting the world right. America had a purpose.

It didn’t matter to Miller that Winthrop wasn’t the beginning of America. Other Puritans founded Salem in 1628; the Mayflower Separatists established Plymouth in 1620; the Dutch arrived in Manhattan in 1609; the Spanish set up St. Augustine in 1565; that other English colony farther south, Virginia, founded in 1607. And let’s not forget that the Native Americans had been here all along. What mattered was that Miller found his purpose.

From there, the image of the city upon a hill worked its way into political discourse. Since the 1960s it has been used by most presidents of the US -- John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama. Each in their own way perpetuate a myth of America exceptionalism, having very little connection to the Winthrop’s sermon or the gospel passage referenced.

This image of a city built on a hill comes after the Beatitudes in Gospel of Matthew. After preaching to the crowds the blessings of a faithful life, Jesus now talks directly to his disciples. You are the salt. You are the light of the world—a city built on a hill. Because you shine, you have the responsibility to do good and to live faithfully. Your light shines so the world can see God’s glory not your individual exceptionalism.

This understanding of responsibility of discipleship flows throughout Winthrop’s sermon. While politicians quote the “city on a hill” line, they skip over Winthrop’s admonition that they are part of a larger community built on love and interdependence. They omit Winthrop’s preaching that for their community to succeed they must heed the prophet Micah and do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly. It is if they live faithfully and care for each other that they will become that city on a hill.

So how did we get from a gospel text about discipleship and a sermon that preaches a community built on justice, mercy, and humility, to an image invoked to proclaim American exceptionalism, rugged-individualism, and prosperity?

There is plenty of blame to go around. We can blame shoddy historical research and writing. We can blame the politicians. We can blame evangelicals doing bad theology. We can find a whole list of other people to blame.

But the first step in undoing the distorted narrative of American exceptionalism, which is a crucial part of White Christian Nationalism, is to not look for someone to blame, but instead to look at ourselves.

We don't have to go too far. Just flip to page 242 in the Book of Common Prayer. There you will find the Collect for Independence Day. It is an updated version from 1928. 1928's "fathers" has become "founders." Liberty was no longer won only for the founding generation, but for "us" too. And then a phrase has been added "and lit the torch of freedom for nations then unborn."

That image grabs us. We think of the Statue of Liberty, perhaps. Of a torch burning brightly. Perhaps it even reminds us of the lights of a city built on a hill...

As uncomfortable as it may be, we have to recognize the history and prayers of our own tradition are interwoven with American exceptionalism that is giving way to White Christian Nationalism.

Our work begins first with us, our communities, and our little part of the Christian Church.

In what ways have we knowingly or not taken part in perpetuating this narrative? In what ways has our theological and biblical study been shaped by the forces of a distorted moral narrative? In what ways have we allowed our preaching to be co-opted in order to hold the status quo.

How do you feel about it? And what are you going to do about it?

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid." There is not contingency in that. It is not a You maybe, might, could. Jesus said "You are the light... a city built on a hill cannot be hid."

As priests, preachers, and teachers in our communities, we are God's light offering guidance and direction. Telling truth.

We are not spotlights. But we are not a single torch. We are the light of a city on a hill, a collection of hundreds, thousands, individual lights. A city represents a group of people sharing space and life together.

In this moment, as priests, preachers, and teachers, our call is be a community of light that holds the space for us to see the truth and to see each other. As the world around us wants to blind us, overwhelm us, and build barriers to keep us from each other, our churches should be places that we are able to see each other, truthfully and with justice, mercy, and humility.

We do not have the luxury of hiding out light under a basket because of our failures, discomfort, or shame. Perhaps the words attributed Maya Angelou can comfort us and get us moving: "You did then what you knew how to do and when you knew better you did better."

We know better. Now it's time to do better. We are a city built on a hill that cannot be hidden.

Amen.