

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 9, 2020 (Epiphany 5, Year A)

On March 21, 1630, at Holyrood Church in Southampton, England, Governor John Winthrop of the Massachusetts Bay Colony spoke to the group of colonists who would set sail upon the Arbella to settle in the New World. Referencing the passage we just heard from Matthew's gospel, Winthrop famously proclaimed to his fellow Puritans that their new settlement would be "as a city upon a hill."

And while we've come to see this phrase as one of soaring inspiration, Winthrop's use of it was a warning, really. A reminder that, as he put it, "the eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken...we shall be made a story and a byword through the world."

This notion of a "city upon a hill" is a wonderfully vivid and powerful image, a fitting metaphor for Jesus to include in his Sermon on the Mount, from which this text is taken. Jesus uttered this phrase in the context of encouraging his followers to be as salt and light. "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."

He's talking about discipleship. He's talking about the great responsibility that comes with hearing the Good News and then dedicating your life to following Jesus. It's not enough to just *hear* Jesus' message, we're called to *heed* it. To live out our faith in the world as examples and agents of God's holiness; to live as Christ's own hands and feet in the world; to claim our identity as followers of Jesus, and then to act upon our faith; to let the light of Christ that shines within each one of us, shine forth into the world.

That's the spiritual context of this "city upon a hill." It's an invitation — a command really — from Jesus to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

And, frankly, I'm not sure whether this whole notion of a "city upon a hill" is better known because of the Sermon on the Mount, or because it's become part of the mythology of America. A mythology first lit by Governor Winthrop, but a torch carried by politicians of every persuasion ever since. A belief that we, as Americans, have a responsibility, a God-given duty, to be a beacon of hope to the world.

Soon after his election as President, John F. Kennedy spoke of America as a "city upon a hill," first saying, "I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the Arbella three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier."

Ronald Reagan said this in his farewell address: "I've spoken of the shining city all my political life...in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here." A poignant thought in our current political climate.

But there's an inherent spiritual arrogance embedded in thinking about this nation as a shining "city upon a hill." The idea that God's favor has been specially placed upon America, making this nation a model for all the other nations of the world; that our way and culture is somehow better than anyone else's. Many of us grew up on this narrative of American exceptionalism and have simply assumed that it was true. We have embraced this elevated sense of nationalistic pride because, after all, who *doesn't* want to feel special and morally superior?

But our whitewashed mythology fails to mention some hard truths. Like the native people who were pushed off the hill upon which our shining city was built. Or the black slaves who were relegated to the valley below. Or the women who were left voiceless as the bricks of this city were being laid. If these stories are left untold, the narrative is an incomplete manuscript at best; and a work of fiction at worst.

The words we speak, of course, don't always live up to our noble ideals. Rhetoric doesn't always match reality. This is true of the Declaration of Independence — "All men are created equal" — really? Then why are white men the only ones who can participate in government. The Statue of Liberty — "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" — really? Then why are we building walls to keep people out? And, yes, the Bible — "Love your enemy as yourself" — really? Then why are we bombing them?

We love lofty language, but we often shy away from the hard work to enact it. We love soaring rhetoric, but we don't always want to roll up our sleeves to turn dreams into reality. The personal cost is too great. We fear a loss of privilege and prestige. And this is the hard work of faith — aligning our words with our actions. Proclaiming Jesus not only with our lips but in our lives.

Now, I still love that image of a "city upon a hill." But it remains aspirational and unrealized. Both spiritually speaking, and as it relates to the ways in which we think about this country. The prophet Isaiah reminds us in our Old Testament passage this morning that until we "loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, break every yoke, share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into our houses, and cover the naked," this city remains an unfulfilled dream. So we have some work to do.

But when we do it, says the prophet, when we take steps to enact justice in the world, "*then* your light shall break forth like the dawn." Then, as Jesus says, "your light will shine before others." And that's where this image of that shining city upon a hill brings hope and salvation to bear. Not when we attempt, in our hubris, to shine a light upon ourselves and our own goodness. But when we recognize that God alone is the source of this light. And that ours is to walk humbly in the warm glow of God's reflected glory.

So this is the question for all of us this morning. How will you act as salt and light to the world? How will you turn rhetoric into reality? How will you let the light of Christ that burns brightly within you, shine before others? I think Isaiah offers us a pretty clear roadmap for taking those first steps.

The thing is, we are all works in progress, collectively a city that is still under construction. Serving God means acknowledging just this. That we are broken vessels in need of the healing that only comes through faith in Jesus Christ. And that, with God's help, we will continue to build that city upon a hill. As individuals, as a community of faith, and as a nation.