

James 3:13-4:3,7-8
Mark 9:30-37

“Puritans and Polar Bears”
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
J. Shannon Webster

20 September 2009
Ordinary 25

Last year Polar Bears were added to the endangered animal list by none other than the Bush administration. There are 20-25,000 Polar Bears in the world today, 15,000 of which are in Canada. The debate is over whether they are an endangered or a threatened species. It isn't that the population of the bears is dramatically declining; it doesn't seem to be. But it is that all the computer models show dramatically diminishing ice in the Arctic over the next 40 years, ice which the bears need to survive, from all we know about them. Last Spring I talked with Ian MacInnes-Green, who is pastor in Barrow, Alaska, on the North Slope. His church is 40 yards from the north coast of the continent. He tells me that the normal pattern has been that the ice is clear from May to October. But since he has been there the ice has been clearing about now and will be gone through December.

Here in Alabama we are a poor judge of global warming. *Any* warming is redundant. But I do find the debate interesting. None of the objections (to classifying Polar Bears as endangered) show care for the species – only that protecting them might, might, curtail an undetermined amount of economic activity. The most extreme blogs ask why we care about the bears, and always want to put other species' needs ahead of “man.” (Never mind that the same blogs scoff at the idea of human rights and think the poor ought to quit their whining. Our sense of entitlement knows no bounds.)

Stewardship is obviously about more than raising money for the church; issues of how we are going to live in this world are directly related to all our finances in the church, and we had better at least discuss Polar Bears (and other things) if we would be stewards. I'll start that discussion by saying I blame Puritan preacher John Cotton for any threat to the Polar bears.

“America” existed as a myth in the European mind, long before Ericsson or Columbus stumbled upon these shores. It was the western “terra incognita”, Avalon, Atlantis, Canaan, the place of cities of gold and fountains of youth. Since this imaginary history preceded the real one, the history of the people who actually lived here was lost.

We have told ourselves another myth – that the Puritans (or Pilgrims) came here fleeing religious persecution. That was true only at a certain point and in some cases. Statistically, the largest influx of Puritan population into New England was when Cromwell was in power in England. They weren't fleeing – they were on a mission from God (to quote the Blues Brothers), heading for the Promised Land.

In their sermons they described crossing the Jordan (the Atlantic) into that land, founding a “City on a Hill” (John Winthrop), on an “*errand into the wilderness*” (Samuel Danforth), to found a new Jerusalem, “*flying from the deprivations of Europe to the American strand*” (Cotton Mather). The Puritan experiment didn't outlive 3 generations in New England, but they laid down in the culture core the myth of Special Destiny that has been with us since their arrival. And woe betide the Native American populations who got in the way. That was one of the downsides of theocracy, along with the stocks, witch trials in Salem, and the Scarlet Letter.

Then 2 of my historical heroes messed this up very badly indeed. Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson secularized the Puritan mission. Neither had any use for the church, and there was social room for critique in both Virginia and Pennsylvania that did not exist in New England at that time. Jefferson rewrote the life of Jesus – leaving out parts of the Bible that he didn't like or thought inconsistent. Franklin particularly didn't like the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, because he abhorred reducing religion to doctrine. Those two articulated a non-doctrinal, non-religious, self-directed secular religion, which secularized the American myth. Special destiny, "chosen-ness", remained, but God was gone from the picture.

Sarah Vowell writes about the Puritans and observes *"The same wakefulness the individual Calvinist was to use to keep watch over his own sins Winthrop and Cotton called for in the group at large. This humility, this fear, was what kept their delusions of grandeur in check. That's what subsequent generations lost."*¹

The result was a Frankenstein's monster. In a land that seemed to be without boundaries, the dominant culture took what they wanted and named it "manifest destiny." The holocaust happened here before it happened in Europe, but with place names like Sand Creek and Wounded Knee.

To illustrate: Walt Whitman, that essential American poet, wrote:

*I celebrate myself,
Shall I pray? Shall I venerate and be ceremonious?
I have pried through the strata and analyzed to a hair,
And counseled with doctors and calculated close and found no
Sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.
Divine I am, inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch...*²

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

*"My estimate of America... like my estimate of my own means and resources,
is all or nothing."*³

William Gilpin wrote of: *"The untransacted destiny of the American people - to subdue the continent – to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean... to carry the career of mankind to the culminating point."*⁴

Albert Beveridge of Indiana, on the floor of the Senate, gave rationale for the conquest of the Philippines, and speechified: *"God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic people for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation... he has marked the American people as his chosen nation to lead in the regeneration of the world."*⁵

Myth, entitlement, Manifest Destiny, Cowboy Hero, Shane, Horatio Alger, Rambo, and Rocky Balboa, even Dominion theology, derive from the American myth. Our greatest authors have been critics of the paradigm, not its legitimizers: Melville, Poe, Twain, Hawthorne, F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Religiously speaking, we bent God to the myth, elevating personal spiritual experience to the supreme place. We kept Jesus (because we wanted to walk with him alone in the garden), but fair threw out Christianity. We have been a people without boundaries, without limits, and poor stewards to boot.

In the 20th century, it started coming unstuck. The myth was never true, but it was true enough for white males that it allowed that structure to continue for a long time. You knew it was collapsing when you saw adult, Anglo males shooting up a brokerage house in Atlanta. That tells you about everything you wanted to know. But there were signs. You had Eastwood playing Detective Harry Callahan, and growling: “*A man’s gotta know his limitations.*” That was actually a radically new concept in American film. (Eastwood has long been groundbreaking. Way back, he played the foreman “Rowdy” in the TV show *Rawhide*, which put forth the radical notion that real cowboys didn’t shoot people, they actually herded cattle. No wonder the show was canceled.)

And gonzo journalist Hunter Thompson could prematurely lament the failure of the counter-culture: “*That, I think was the handle – that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of old and evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn’t need that. Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting – on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave. So now, less than 5 years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look west, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark – that place where the wave finally broke, and rolled back.*”⁶

That would drive us to our passage from James. “Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” His readers were evidently people proud of their intellect, or at least their feigned wisdom. The epistle writer tells them their prayers go unanswered because they’re praying for the wrong things – “you ask wrongly in order to spend on your pleasures.” They are not even looking for social or political rights, but only material advantage. If they were really wise, they would show it through humble conduct. Combative self-assertion is not God’s sort of gifts. And any version of that “prosperity gospel” is a corruption of the Puritan values that first saw tangible goods as a sign of God’s favor.

This is probably what brought up in many of us anger against some people in the financial industry – lack of any humility, arrogance that thought it didn’t have to account for the millions in bail-out money they spent. As that great theologian Kris Kristofferson sang: “*He’s a Taker, and he’ll take her and make her fly higher than she’s ever known. Then he’ll take off and leave her, taking all of her pride as he goes.*”⁷

Or the Psalmist said it this way, in Psalm 123:

“Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us;
For we have had more than enough of contempt,
Our soul has had more than its fill of those who are at ease.”

Mark tells us of Jesus reprimanding the disciples for getting it backwards. They were arguing about who was the greatest. (Probably Peter, but he’s got an asterisk by his name on account of steroids.) Jesus had a sit-down with them to say: “who wants to be first must be last and servant of all.” He took a child and put it among them – a child had no status except as a potential adult, and represented the lowly, and the vulnerable. “Whoever welcomes such a one in my name welcomes me.”

What do we make of that – that Jesus is in the weakest, the most lowly in status, the most vulnerable – when we have a national culture that assumes it has primacy over all the rest of the world, and that its power and privilege is a God-given right? Success isn’t all it’s cracked

up to be, maybe. Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen point out that : “our crises have as many positive origins as negative”⁸ – are due as much to our successes as our failures... the law of unintended consequences. Fire suppression in the western forests created undergrown brush and terrible fires. Better nutrition and increased food supply led to population growth, leading to food crises and environmental damage and decreased food supply. Easy credit and a “society of homeowners” somehow led to fancy, powerful and intricate financial instruments that destroyed the housing market and wrecked us all. Birch and Rasmussen call it convergence, or “interacting limits.” We need a new model – or an old one, the Steward. Douglas John Hall offered 25 years ago the steward as an image “over and against the ownership and mastery assumptions of secular modernity”⁹ Stewards are servants among servants, who call humanity to account for its actions and attitudes in relation to all other creatures. Like Polar Bears.

“Show by your good life that your works are done with a gentleness born of wisdom.” If our culture got wise we might be hurrying to resurrect the WPA. We might be asking if our plans were just, constructive, and would care for the least of these - as opposed to our language that says only: “We’ve got to get the money moving around.” Within our churches as well, where is the group talking about “vocation” and calling, and – job or no job – talking with our members about what good work is and why? Now would be exactly the time to reclaim the Puritan virtues of thrift and community responsibility.

We need the model of Jesus, who we may welcome in the least, welcome in the child, welcome in the unemployed, who welcomes us to the table, where in his brokenness we are made full and whole. That’s a counter-cultural act right now, and we need to do it.

Alabama songwriter Pierce Pettis wrote a song which ends this way:

*Now on the satellite TV, every day you see ‘em.
Live from the lap of luxury, it’s the Lions of the Coliseum.
With politicians, millionaires, you won’t see Mother Teresa there,
Just the holy rollers with their manes of hair, Lions of the Coliseum.
But there’s rebel graffiti on the walls inside the Coliseum.
Down below in the underground, the defiant ones are meeting.
Hiding in the underground, Blood Brothers pass the cup around.
And they pay no heed to the roaring sound of the Lions of the Coliseum.*¹⁰

+ + + + + + + + +

¹ Vowell, Sarah. The Wordy Shipmates. Riverhead Books, NY, 2008, p. 71

² Whitman, Walt. Song of Myself, Leaves of Grass, 1855

³ Emerson, Ralph Waldo.

⁴ Gilpin, William. Mission of the North American People, Philadelphia, 1874, p. 130

⁵ Beveridge, Senator Albert. Address to the U.S. Senate, January 9, 1900.

⁶ Thompson, Hunter. Songs of the Doomed. More Notes on the Death of the American Dream. Summit Books, NY, 1990. p. 141.

⁷ Kristofferson, Kris. The Taker. Silver Tongued Devil and I. Monument Records, 1991.

⁸ Birch, Bruce and Rasmussen, Larry. The Predicament of the Prosperous, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1978. p.29-30

⁹ Hall, Douglas John. Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1985.

¹⁰ Pettis, Pierce. Lions of the Coliseum, Chase the Buffalo, Windham Hill, 1993