

## CITY ON A HILL

Matthew 5:14-16

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday After Epiphany, February 5, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### SCRIPTURE

*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

In 1629, an English Puritan lawyer named John Winthrop became President of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and a few months later, led a wave of colonists from England to the New World, founding a number of colonies along the Charles River and Massachusetts Bay. As Captain of the *Arabella*, on which he and his band of colonists sailed, he preached a sermon entitled “A Model of Christian Charity.” Its closing paragraph read in part:

...for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a byword through the world...<sup>1</sup>

Winthrop’s sober warning was preceded by an eloquent vision of what their City on a Hill would be:

Now the onely way to...provide for our posterity is to followe the Counsell of Micah, to doe Justly, to love mercy, to walke humbly with our God, for this end, wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities...for the supply of others necessities, wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekenes, gentlenes, patience and liberallity, wee must delight in eache other, make others Condicions our owne rejoyce together, mourne together, labour, and suffer together, allwayes haveing before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body...

This sermon was not widely distributed until it was published two hundred years later. It became part of American folklore another hundred years later, during and after the Cold War, when it became a staple of Presidential speeches, starting with President Kennedy, then President Reagan, then President Obama.

The image of “A City on a Hill” comes from the Sermon on the Mount, the inaugural teaching of Jesus in Matthew. Just as Winthrop delivered his sermon to a handful of settlers aboard a ship, Jesus delivered his sermon to a handful of disciples, as they were seated on a mountain side, and in which he assumed the seating position of the teacher and rabbi he was to them.

Jesus mentions the “City of a Hill” only once, and links it with another image – “The Light of the World” – which has deeper roots in the Old Testament and which Jesus will use in other Gospels as well.<sup>2</sup>

*You are the light of the world [he says]. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iu17.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/5-City-Upon-a-Hill-John-Winthrop-1630-Brady-11-19-10.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, 52:10, and 60:3; as well as John 8:2; Acts 13:47; Acts 26:23.

*same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

What the images of both *city* and *light* share is that they *cannot* be hidden. It is the nature of a city to be *visible*, whether an oasis in the desert, a village on a mountainside, or tall buildings arising in a large metropolis. Likewise, it is the nature of light to be *seen*. Even if one were to put a light beneath a bushel basket (hiding it under a bowl) its rays would seep out into the darkness of the room.

In using the image of “A City on a Hill” and connecting it to the image of “The Light of the World,” Jesus conveys that as leaders of the early Christian Church, the disciples are not simply a *collection of individuals* but a *community*, a movement, whose purpose is to provide light to “all the house,” all the nations of the world.

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In addition, the *verbs* in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount are *indicative*; they *describe* the way the people of God *are* in God’s eyes and under God’s blessing. “You *are* a city on a hill.” “You *are* the light of the world.” And in the linguistic pattern of faith, *indicative* leads to *imperative*, *aspiration* leads to *action*, *vision* leads to *volition*, as the final verb *calls* and *instructs* the disciples and *throughout the ages*: “*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*”

Now we know from history that none of our early settlements proved to be perfect “cities on a hill.” In Massachusetts alone, there were religious controversies, witch trials, and Winthrop himself kept three slaves. Likewise, we also know that the movement Jesus inaugurated on the Sermon on the Mount provided light that sometimes dimmed before the world, that sometimes shone in the wrong places, that sometimes seemed to illumine itself more than the God who called it. The truth is: Never in history has the church been immune from the “powers and principalities” that continue to mar human life since the Fall. But the charge John Winthrop issued – echoing the charge Jesus Christ issues – continues to call us to a humble greatness today:

...doe Justly...love mercy...walke humbly with our God... abridge our selves of our superfluties...for the supply of others necessities...rejoyce together, mourne together, labour, and suffer together...

And perhaps the most important: “delight in eache other.”

## II.

In the forty-three years I have been a minister, there have been several times churches I have served have come together to support *individuals* who are hurting, though none as thoroughly as you did for the Reverend Whitney Fauntleroy the past two years. An extraordinary need met with an extraordinary response.

And there have been times I have seen congregations rally to support and strengthen in heroic ways their *congregational identity and witness* for the future:

- In the Houston congregation I served, a Session met all day on a Saturday to affirm its strong theological understanding of “God alone” being the “Lord” of individual conscience and unanimously reversed an action they had taken in a close vote a few weeks earlier that had stepped back from that affirmation.

- The Iowa church I served came to a hard-won decision – reached over ten years of deliberation – to strengthen their identity as a downtown congregation by investing in a renovation of their facilities and a restoration of the interior of their Sanctuary in keeping with its historic design.

Three other times of congregational heroism I have experienced with or from you.

- A decision people sitting in these pews a year before I arrived in 2004 – during a time you were led by an interim pastor – to proceed with renovating these facilities into what we have today
- A decision the people sitting in these pews in 2015 made to expand the pastoral staff to four pastors
- And what you have done during the last five months.

My friends:

- You have stayed with this congregation during COVID.
- You have embraced the widespread use of livestreaming worship and providing learning and fellowship and music opportunities online.
- You have “bounced back” with joyful determination this Fall with an array of in-person trips, retreats, hands-on mission projects, music offerings, youth fellowships, adult formation classes and tours of Freedom House on the coldest day of the year; you have “bounced back” by reaching out to visitors, attending worship when you are able in person, joining via livestream when you are traveling.

And as you shall see at our Annual Meeting in a few minutes, you have invested – in an un-miserly way – in this staff and the individuals who are serving and leading you through exceeding the goal the Session set before you in our Stewardship Campaign and enabling us in these *inflationary* times to provide everyone on the staff compensation appropriate to their responsibilities, training, and experience. You have invested in the future in which you believe, in the light shining before others, in the city on this hill.

### III.

What does this investment mean?

*First*, it means we have survived the crisis of COVID. It means that we are going to be here, as least for the foreseeable future, hopefully longer, as we have been in this location, at this corner, for over eighty-years. That light of God we reflect will continue to shine.

That was not a given on Friday, March 13, 2020, when our Session met for the first time on a conference call and voted to close our facilities and move worship to a word I only vaguely knew at the time: “Livestream.”

36 hours later, we were online. A Sunday never passed with Westminster not worshipping. We always have worship on Sunday. And we have indeed survived.

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*Second*, the investment we have made means that we can continue to attract people who understand, relate, and embrace the Christian faith in the ways we express it: through traditional Presbyterian worship and music,

through a high level of learning and being formed, through a rich life together, and through serving God as we serve others. The doors of the church are open. We are here for all who come. We will strengthen and nurture their faith and they strengthen and nurture ours. Our light still shines. Our city remains on this modest hill.

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*Third*, we will continue to do what we do with the grace, humor, and joy that have always marked our life together.

If you have not seen the video of last week's Bell Choir Anthem, I urge you to view it online. We normally have about 75 people who watch our services after they are completed; this week it is 11,000 and counting.

To recap:

- During the Handbell anthem, a strap on one of the large handbells broke as Jason Zeibel rang it; and the bell came crashing into the center of the Handbell Choir and cracked in several places.
- Undeterred, the handbell choir continued with its piece, while Jason retrieved the broken bell and reached for another.
- Then in the offertory prayer that followed, Patrick Hunnicutt offered a Protestant version of last rites for the deceased bell referring to it by its formal name and number.

What struck me are two aspects of Westminster this incident reveals:

- We don't stop worship for any reason. The bells kept ringing. The band played on.
- And perhaps most of all: we are a congregation which laughs – *together* – *at* ourselves – and *with* one another. As John Winthrop said: we "delight in each other."

#### IV.

So...

*You are the light of the world.  
A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.  
No one after lighting a lamp  
Puts it under the bushel basket,  
But on the lampstand,  
And it gives light to all in the house.  
In the same way,  
Let your light shine before others,  
So that they may see your good works  
And give glory to your Father in heaven.*

Amen.