

What do the Bunker Hill monument, the Ladies Mount Vernon Association, the Seamens Aid Society, the children's song *Mary had a little lamb*, and Thanksgiving have in common? Give up? The answer is Sarah Josepha Hale. Sarah authored the lyrics to *Mary had a little lamb* and was the principal advocate for making the fourth Thursday in November a national day of thanksgiving. She lobbied Presidents Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan before she was successful in 1863 with President Lincoln. She did not live to see it become a federal holiday through an act of Congress in 1941.

Sarah's first profession was as a school teacher. She married and had five children. Unfortunately she was widowed days before her fifth child was born and she knew she could not provide for her family on a school teacher's salary. She was a prolific writer and became the editor of a women's magazine. Through the power of that publication, she raised the money from contributions by women for the completion of the Bunker Hill monument in Massachusetts and joining with the Ladies Mount Vernon Association saved the home of our first president. She also used her prodigious fund raising skills to begin the Seamens Aid Society, an association dedicated to assisting merchant marines and their families.

These are amazing achievements for a woman born in the eighteenth century. What motivated her? Certainly, she was persistent in attaining her goals. She didn't listen to naysayers who didn't believe that women should be educated or that women could not achieve great things. She was deeply affected by the divisions in our country created by the institution of slavery. She looked for projects or causes that would unite our country and help us come together as one people. She found them especially in her efforts to save George Washington's home at Mount Vernon and making Thanksgiving a national celebration, rather than a regional, New England celebration.

And although I found no evidence of this, I suspect that her religion played a role in her philanthropy and her desire to unite a nation of great promise: a nation that was founded as being the bright city upon a hill with the potential to be the new Jerusalem. I further suspect that through her efforts and ability to reach a large audience, through the power of her pen, she partnered with God in ushering in more of God's Kingdom. Like our Evangelist John, who authored the fourth Gospel and the Book of Revelation, she understood the power of the Word, and the use of symbols

or metaphors to reveal essential truths. So as you count your blessings this Thanksgiving holiday, I hope you remember Sarah Josepha Hale.

I also hope that you will use this season of harvest and thanks to compare and contrast this day when we celebrate the risen Christ and give to Christ our full allegiance. By way of the cross, we have been given the freedom to serve God, the God who is not only the beginning and the end of all things, this is the God who is always doing more. This is the message today's evangelist wants us to hear in our lesson from John's Gospel and from Revelation.

John's stories show us how poorly earthly power compares with God's power. As we look at the Gospel reading, Pilate appears to be the one in control. He has the power to release Jesus or to have him killed. Jesus and Pilate have a conversation about whether Jesus is King. Jesus is rather clear that his kingdom is not of this world, that it belongs to the realm of truth. As we know from the story, Pilate finds no reason to condemn Jesus to death, and yet he does. Why? Because Pilate is afraid. He's afraid of losing control. He's afraid of how he'll appear to Rome if a portion of his subjects cause an uprising. This is more important than justice. This is more important than following his heart and his instincts.

For Pilate, how much better is it to remain in power, to have the appearance of control and condemn an innocent man to death than to serve justice and appear weak? So in the verse that continues this reading, Pilate sneers, “what is truth?” Pilate has to sneer, for his truth is that he craves power and control all the while being a fearful man. He lacks the courage of his conviction that Jesus has done no wrong. It appears in this moment that earthly powers have the upper hand.

In our brief passage from Revelation, John is reminding his audience of who Jesus is, explains what he has done for us and tells us what our response should be.¹ So, according to John, who is Jesus? Jesus is a faithful witness or a faithful martyr. He has been a mentoring teacher who provides sacrificial service to God’s chosen people. Jesus is also the first born of the dead, the one who, on our behalf, has overcome death and has assumed his rightful place in heaven. Finally, Jesus is ruler over all the kings of the earth as Jesus possesses the ultimate authority over all of creation.

And what has Jesus done for us? Well, he loves us and he has freed us from our sins which enables us to be members of a kingdom under

¹ Peter M. Wallace, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word Year B, volume 4*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009, 329.

Jesus' authority and serve the Lord our God. Having done this for us, what should our response be? Our response should be that we will also be faithful witnesses, that we ardently desire to understand his will for us, and that we are willing to serve others, even at the expense of ourselves.

Finally, our life's goal is to bring others into Jesus reign of love and praise, which continues without ceasing.² This does not sound the least bit easy, and living in a democratic republic, serving within a kingdom with complete fealty to the sovereign sounds very foreign.

For us in our time and place, what comprises the Empire? As Americans we prize our rugged individualism and independence, which can be both a virtue and a failing. As a failing, it can lead to self-indulgence and can make us forget that as part of the Body of Christ, our collective participation as a community should transcend the self. Our relative prosperity leads us to every greater commercialism and consumerism. This behavior, with our reliance on fossil fuels and useage of the earth's resources at an unsustainable rate has a destructive impact upon God's creation. We tolerate ever growing disparities between those who control great wealth and those who are a paycheck away from disaster.

² Ibid.

Divisiveness and fear seem to be the modus operandi of those who seek control. Civil discourse ceases to be civil. We are rightfully afraid of those who seek to sow terror into the fabric of our lives, as we witnessed last week in the coordinated attacks in Paris. Social media and some politicians offer us false choices: homeless American children versus a refugee or a homeless veteran versus a refugee. How do the two equate? How did our veterans and our children become potential victims of refugees? The governors of various states have said “refugees aren’t welcome here” and our House of Representatives have voted to make the 18 month plus vetting of all those seeking refugee status, harder - all in the name of security and an unfounded fear of a possible terrorist posing as a refugee. Muslims are once again being regarded with suspicion and are considered dangerous as a group. Yet most Muslims, like most Americans, view the attackers in Paris as terrorists and not acting as God would have us act. These terrorists are as representative of Islam about as much as the Klue Klux Klan is representative of Christianity.

If Christ is indeed our King, then we will find the courage to put fear in its place. We will find a way to be faithful witnesses in loving the stranger among us, acting sacrificially on the stranger’s behalf. We will act as if

God's kingdom has already transformed the entire cosmos. We are hostage to no one with Christ as our king, because Christ affords us ALL a power and dignity that our government, or any government, may refuse to recognize. As a church, we are called to witness to the lordship of God by our opposition to all earthly powers that seek to usurp the place of God.³ This is not comfortable or easy work. Yet the plus side of our American individualism is exactly the type of persistence that Sarah Josepha Hall exhibited, working toward a goal with passion, no matter how long it takes. American has long been that shining city on a hill, where Lady Liberty proclaims our highest ideal to all who enter New York Harbor, *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free*. This is where our calling as Christians and our good luck at being Americans coincide.

In our own part of the world, through many of the individuals who make up this parish, we are no stranger to hard work - whether it is the hard work of putting together Thanksgiving baskets or the hard work of making Thanksgiving dinner for over 200 people. Yet I hear over and over again that this hard work is a labor of love. As a labor of love, the sacrifice

³ Jane E. Fahey, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word: Year B Volume 4*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009, 330.

of self, or of money and of time scarcely feels like a sacrifice. It must be then, that we are trying to live into and celebrate Christ as our Sovereign.

May we gain strength from this table and the meal that we are about to share, as we venture forth to continue Christ's work in the world and as we share out of our abundance this Thanksgiving and always.

AMEN.