SERMON
St. Peter's UCC
November 23, 2025
"The Pilgrim's Progress"

Scripture:
Philippians 4:4-9 Rejoice in the Lord
Psalm 100
Luke 17:11-19 Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers

A man named John Bunyan - not to be confused with Paul Bunyan, the mythical figure who was a giant lumberjack in American folklore - but John Bunyan, wrote a book way back in 1678 called The Pilgrim's Progress. The book has been reprinted many times, and has been translated into more than 200 languages.

The book is about a man named Christian who feels the weight of his sin, and so he decides to journey from the City of Destruction; that is, this world, to the Celestial City; that is, heaven. Christian meets many people on his journey, whose names reflect either positive or negative traits in humanity and in Christians. Of course, the book represents the journey of

every Christian, as we seek Christ to help us overcome the ways of the world.

The reason I bring up Bunyan's book this morning, however, is not because of the contents of the book, but for another reason. What I found interesting were the details about where Bunyan wrote the book. He actually wrote the book while in jail. Bunyan was in jail for many years for holding worship services that were outside of the Church of England.

On the surface, therefore, all of that jail time could be seen as a tragedy or as a failure in Bunyan's life. On the surface, he tried to express his devotion to God in his own way, and was punished for it; a tragedy; a failure. But instead, jail provided a setting for one of the most famous Christian books ever written, besides the Bible. His story shows up in many places and in many ways, from an opera by Ralph Vaughn Williams to a video game or animated TV show. Famous authors have referenced it, and it has been developed for TV and movies.

Bunyan should have disappeared into history, forgotten. Certainly, the authorities of that time figured that he was removed to protect the

status quo; to protect the faith, and England itself. But all that it takes in a life is a notion from God to achieve the unexpected; to offer grace in ways not foreseen.

From a jail cell, held there for years, unexpected fruit was grown and harvested. Bunyan sat in the barren field of a jail cell and yet bore fruit for God; as it turns out, in abundance. His personal journey, like the protagonist of his story; his faith journey, survived, even thrived, through twists and turns, and swamps, so to speak, that felt inescapable. Years of jail time ended up being cause for praise and thanksgiving; thanksgiving to God, whose guiding hand can reach any darkness, through any despair.

From the beginning of Christianity, unexpected fruits and cause for thanksgiving have arisen out of adversity, persecution, and suffering. After Jesus ascended into heaven, persecution of Christians caused many to flee, but, on the other hand, they took their new-found faith with them into foreign regions and lands, causing Christianity to spread, and many more to come to Christ.

Talk about unexpected fruits - in the book of Acts, a persecutor of Christians named Saul is stunned by a vision, an experience of God in Christ. The transformed Saul changes his name to Paul, and takes that same energy he had to persecute Christians, and instead uses it to spread Christianity into other countries, even to non-Jews. He helps the first Christians to understand that Christ is for all the world, Jews and Gentiles alike; this from one of the cruelest persecutors of Christians. Now his letters to newly formed Christian communities make up much of our New Testament. From this unlikely source of unexpected fruits, we have much reason to praise and thank God, just as Paul told us to do, for he was once lost, but was then found.

In the 1500's in Germany, Martin Luther was a Catholic monk who felt that a proper Christian should continually punish oneself with self-inflicted penances. He had a very negative view of the faith, with his focus on Christ more as a jailer or hangman of his soul. Luther's superior tried to breed in Luther a more positive, loving understanding of the faith. The superior reminded Luther that Christ has overcome death and hell; a

victorious Christ for all people. With such words, Luther was able to continue, but it forced such a change in him that he began to look at his faith with fresh eyes. He saw contrasts in the Bible with some traditional understandings of Christ and the faith. Eventually, as we know, Luther was excommunicated for his views. He had to hide at Wartburg castle to save his life. At first look, it would seem that a tragedy had occurred; Luther had gone from a despairing faith to a new-found faith; only to land in despairing circumstances; holed up in a cold room of a castle.

However, God had a different notion, and God's grace and vision were at work. While holed up in part of the castle, Luther translated the New Testament from the original Greek into German; a version so popular and widespread in later years, that it even became the holy word read on Clover Mill Road in Chester Springs. As we heard on Reformation Sunday at the end of October, The Rev. Jesse Knipe, pastor here for over 50 years, used a Bible of Luther's translation. So no, that castle was not a tragedy, void of life. Instead, unexpected fruits came from that castle to

bless Western Europe and early America; certainly cause for praise and thanksgiving.

The Pilgrim settlers of Plymouth Colony in 1620, in what is now Massachusetts, were English refugees, fleeing persecution in the name of religious freedom. They first fled to the Netherlands, then came here. Leaving homes, facing uncertainty, daring to take on a giant expanse of ocean, then experiencing enough delays that the first winter was spent on the Mayflower in squalid conditions; certainly all of this had the appearance of failure, with cause for despair. Work parties that went out each day diminished because of disease and death. Almost half of the Pilgrims died that winter into the spring.

Relationships with the native Americans were rocky, but the native Americans ended up showing the Pilgrims how to plant crops and survive in their new home. By November, a great feast was held among the Pilgrims and native Americans; our first Thanksgiving.

At first, in those first months of the Pilgrims, desperation, struggle, and suffering seemed destined for our understanding of this part of history,

but God had other plans, and heaven's grace was at work. Amazingly, unexpected fruits grew out of death and despair. This truly was God's doing; certainly cause for praise and thanksgiving.

Every Christian of every time and place can be understood in the identity of a pilgrim. Uncertainty has been a constant companion for much of Christian history. Extreme suffering and hardship have been known in certain times and places. The faith journey of every generation of Christians has counted on a willingness of each generation to understand themselves as pilgrims, trusting that God will lead them to that which is holy; to sacred spaces, together with God; ultimately, to heaven itself.

In this week of Thanksgiving, may we give thanks for the pilgrim's journey in every generation that has followed a path of faith. Bless us all, O God, and guide us in our time, until you call us home, and where, in a spirit of thankfulness, we may join the faithful pilgrims of every time and place. Amen.