

The Promise of Thanksgiving

By Dennis Payton Knight

A single event in America that took place in November of 1621 to celebrate the first harvest may well be the best Thanksgiving ever because it has served as the template for all of them since. It was, in fact, maybe the first time but certainly not the last time people in our country have thanked their creator for the refuge of a new world.

Most of us in America are descendants of people who came to our shores looking for a better existence. Even the aboriginal people of this continent, regardless of what we call them, crossed from Asia over the Bering Straits seeking refuge from hunger, pestilence, or unknown terrors. Their descendants too were part of that first Thanksgiving in 1621.

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these the homeless, tempest-tost to me..."*

That is what Emma Lazarus saw of America in her famous words engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty. Unfortunately, what is supposed to be the refuge of the United States is not always as welcoming as Lazarus promised. Sometimes we dishonor her words and the meaning of our first Thanksgiving itself, standing at our shores shouting, "No! Not You!" We have managed at times to reject folks from all corners of the world who don't look like us or profess to believe in the god of our choice.

In 1917 we imposed literacy tests, creating mental, moral, physical and economic standards, purposely shutting out Japanese, Chinese and other Asians, anarchists and "subversives." In 1924 we set quotas based on the desirability of various nationalities. Aliens from northern and western Europe were considered more desirable than those from southern and eastern Europe. In case you forgot your geography, that means we approved of the English and French, but not so much the Spanish and Italians, and never the Russians.

Despite such laws we are a rainbow nation, filled with folks of every origin and every description. As citizens, we are all guaranteed by law, if not practicality, the refuge and fruits of the United States. It is a good and safe place to be. That is, if you are here.

Elsewhere in the world today millions are fleeing war, persecution, or natural disaster. Of those, President Obama would like to welcome into the United States a tiny fraction, about ten thousand, tempest-tost to us from Syria.

To that, many shout, "No! Not You!" because one or more may come with evil intent. That there may be terrorists among them cannot be argued. We do, after all, know terrorists and breed our own. But would a person in a storm find shelter only to destroy it? Would he not instead find it occasion for the greatest Thanksgiving ever?

And after all, what is so different about a Palestinian family seeking refuge in Bethlehem from a Syrian family seeking refuge in America?