Pulpit Rock

December 9, 1620

The snow and icy ocean spray of the dreadful storm pelted the faces of the eighteen exhausted sojourners as they struggled in the dark of night to keep their damaged ship on course. With a mast broken in three places, a destroyed rudder, and coats covered in thick ice that were later described as “coats of iron,” the travel-weary pilgrims who left England in search of religious freedom wondered if this would be how they perished. Despite their overwhelming fear, “still the Lord kept [them], and [they] bore up for an island before [them].”

These faith-filled Christians had experienced the power of the Almighty many times over.

A few days prior, a scouting party had been assembled to explore the shores of Cape Cod in hopes of locating a place for the sick and suffering pilgrims to find refuge—considering they had landed 250 miles north of their original destination. Among this group of eighteen men, twelve were signers of the Mayflower compact and three were future governors of the Plymouth Colony. All were brave men seeking to fulfill the promise they had made with God and each other.

On the second day, as they navigated the coastline, the group spotted “some ten or twelve Indians” and continued a few miles further before running ashore. In an effort to make first contact with their new neighbors, the Pilgrim party “followed the track[s] of the Indians’ bare feet a good way on the sands” but were unsuccessful in their pursuit. That night, the men set up an armed watch, seeking to get some rest. At “about midnight [they heard] a hideous cry,” and the men startled awake and grabbed their arms. Terrified, they fired off a few muskets into the dark, finally concluding the noise had come from wolves. The men returned to rest.

As twilight came and the company finished their morning prayers, terrible screams interrupted the silence once again. Someone exclaimed, “They are men! Indians! Indians!” Arrows pierced the morning air as the men scrambled to retrieve their weapons. Based on the noise of their attackers, William Bradford later estimated thirty or forty Indians had tried to put an end to the new settlers’ mission. At last, under the barrage of arrows tipped with eagle claws, brass, and animal bone, the men recovered their arms and returned fire. Having gained the upper hand, the Pilgrims pushed their attackers back a quarter mile before ending the conflict with no casualties on either side.

When they returned to the place of the ambush, the ground was covered in arrows, some of which had pierced the hanging coats of the Pilgrims. Having felt the protection afforded them by their covenant with God, they gave thanks to God “for [their] deliverance” and headed out into the bay to continue their search for a place to settle. By night fall, they had entered the dreadful storm.

Struggling through the snow and biting wind, the Pilgrims were thrust toward the island surrounded by sharp rocks as mighty waves crashed over them. All they could do was pray. Miraculously, as Bradford recounted, the winds changed and “it pleased the Divine Providence that [they] fell upon a place of sandy ground” where they offloaded and sought shelter to wait out the storm.

The next morning, the Pilgrims woke up to a clear and calm sky. It was the perfect opportunity to repair their boat which lay beaten and broken on the shore, but that day was a Sunday—the first Sunday that would be spent on the New England land. If ever there were an “ox in the mire,” it was then, for they did not know how long the weather would permit the repair of their ship. But these weather-worn men were under no illusions. The success of their mission did not depend on the well-being of their ship—that had been proven the previous night—for they knew the source of their success lay in the hand of Almighty God.

With faith burning brighter than the morning sun, the Pilgrims held a Sunday service at a place known by tradition as Pulpit Rock—a thirty-ton granite boulder that now bears the inscribed words from William Bradford’s journal: “On the Sabboth day wee rested.” Thus, we see the striving of a covenant people seeking to follow the Lord’s exhortation in Ezekiel: “[H]allow my sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between me and you, that ye may know that I am the Lord your God.”

The next day, they landed at Plymouth.

Submitted by Hayden Paul