

by Gary E. Wait

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following sermon was given by Gary E. Wait, a Methodist minister from Union Village and Thetford Center. The sermon was presented on Thanksgiving Eve and we would like to share it with our readers.

It is almost 150 years to the day that they hauled that massive granite pyramid up the slope to the burying ground behind the old meeting house that once stood on this spot, and, men and oxen straining, maneuvered it over the rollers and into position above the grave it was to mark. Unlike the marble tablet it replaced, it bore no inscription — but then, everyone in those days knew whose body lay beneath. For forty of his nearly ninety years, Nathaniel Niles had been their neighbor, and for many of those years, their preacher and pastor, as well.

He had come into this valley ahead of most of them. He had seen his sons and daughters — and theirs — grow to maturity here. He had seen the land cleared for farms. He had seen sawmills and gristmills built here, and further down the westward valleys in Post Mills and Thetford and Pompanusuc. By the time of his death in 1828, the United States mail came as close as Post Mills in the town of Thetford. He had seen log cabins and makeshift shelters give way to frame farmhouses. And, he had had the satisfaction of seeing the first meeting house raised in 1811, and the first settled minister installed then years later in 1821.

Up to that time, he had preached to them himself — more often than not, to as many as could crowd themselves into the kitchen of his own home; to as many as would wait while he broke his discourse, when necessary, to

swarm the bees or get in the escaped pig. That is, he preached to them when he was at home, which was seldom enough; for his ability and integrity had won the confidence of his neighbors, and they had chosen him to one public office after another in those years: to the state legislature for seven terms between 1784 and 1814; delegate to the convention that drew up the first Vermont Constitution in 1791, and to the one that revised it in 1814; and twice they and their neighbors up and down the valleys of eastern Vermont had sent him to Philadelphia to represent them in the National House of Representatives. In fact, he had been their first representative in Congress, back in those early days when Vermont had two Congressmen instead of one. And, if he had taken no very prominent part in the debates in Philadelphia, nevertheless, Niles brought to the National Assembly a combination of Christian integrity and Vermont common-sense that must have made Congress the better for his presence.

And when he was at home, he told them of the God who had created the land on which they lived and labored, and how it was that, they held in trust for Him. He told them of a Christ whose goodness went so far, that he had given his whole life that they might be free forever from sin and selfishness — free to work together for the life that God had given them in a land that could be paradise on earth as long as they used it well. And here in this remote Vermont valley, he must also have brought the news from outside: news of the patriotic hopes and dreams of people all up and down the Connecticut Valley, all up and down the Atlantic seacoast, all up and down the many valleys so much like their Middle Brook, that stretched their probing fingers into the back-country. He brought news of the national government in Philadelphia; news of

commerce in New York and Providence, in Salem and Newburyport and New Haven. He brought news of Boston — where, years before, he himself had witnessed the Battle of Bunker Hill, the first major encounter in America's struggle for liberty.

Liberty — that wonderful gift of God to all people, rich and poor, high and low, trader and farmer, professional man and mechanic to all alike. Liberty, the right and the responsibility God gave to each to work for their own livelihood, and for the good of their whole community. Liberty, that God-given right to enjoy and share the fruits of their own labors, and to enjoy an equal voice in the government of all.

He had preached often on that theme in the days before Bunker Hill, when, as a young theological student, he had supplied the congregational pulpits of seaboard New England, travelling about from church to church, wherever a preacher was needed, proclaiming the news of God's gift of liberty and justice for everyone. The outbreak of war had found him in Boston. And in the patriotic fervor that followed Bunker Hill, he, too, had joined the Continental Army that was assembling in Cambridge under the command of a Virginian named Washington. And while they waited there for the next act in the drama of independence, he had composed a patriotic poem which he called "The American Hero", a poem which, if not destined to rank with the great literature of the new land, at least lacked nothing in patriotic fervor and religious zeal. It was set to music; and for many it took its place alongside Billings' "Chester" as the battle song of the Revolution:

Why should vain mortals tremble at the sight of Death and destruction in the field of battle,

Where blood and carnage clothe the
ground in crimson, Sounding in death groans!

While all their hearts quick palpitate for
havoc. Let slip your blood-hounds, named the
British lions,

Duantless Death stares, nimble as the
whirlwind, Dreadful as demons!

Still shall the banner of the King of
Heaven Never advance where I'm afraid to
follow:

While that precedes me, with an open
bosom, War, I defy thee!

How long Niles remained in the Continental
Army is not now known; and only the recent
discovery of a portion of his journal has firm-
ly established what was always believed:
that he had, indeed, been there. But, by the
early 1780's, he was on the Middle Brook, to
the west of Fairlee, where he and some
associates from the vicinity of Windsor,
Conn., had bought tracts of land and were
carving out farms for themselves and their
families in the wilderness of Vermont. And
presently, he was again preaching the gospel
of Christ in the wilderness, and keeping alive
those patriotic ideals for, which he, himself,
had borne arms. There he labored for over 40
years — two generations as we reckon time —
he and those who came with him. Some of you
are descended from those people; for the old
families still persist in the Valleys. And all of
us have come into the rich heritage which
Nathaniel Niles and his comrades — hard-
working Christian men and women, with a
dream of what life ought to be like —
established here: in the Three Brooks, here in
Thetford and Fairlee and Bradford. We have
inherited their labor, and we have been en-
trusted with their faith and dreams, and with
their ideals. For as the Scriptures remind us:

"One sows and another reaps . . . For other
folk labored, and we are entered into their
labor."

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving Day — that
uniquely American holiday that combines our
patriotic and religious heritage in one grand
celebration of thanks to the God who has, as
the old hymn says, seen us safe thus far, both
as a people and as individual Christians. It is
usual, in our Thanksgiving services, to hark
back to the first settlers on the New England
shore, and to commemorate their
thanksgiving festival, as they gathered to
praise God for seeing them safe across the
ocean and for preserving them through the
first hard year in the Plymouth Colony. That
is where it began, of course. But let us never
forget that that was only a beginning. They
were the ones who planted the seed; they
were the ones who had a wonderful dream of
what a new Christian commonwealth carved
out of the wilderness could be like. But if that
dream had died with them, if there had not
been some in every generation who believed
in it and worked for it and passed it on to their
children with the hope that it would continue
forever, it would not have come down to us
today in all the richness of spiritual and
material things that we celebrate today. For
no good thing is achieved without labor; and
no good thing is preserved without labor. And
no good thing lasts for long if it is not shared
with others, kept pure, and passed along to
one's friends and children, a little better than
one received it.

No, our heritage did not stop with the
Pilgrims: it continued on, generation after
generation, as men and women in places like
this labored to make Christ's commonwealth
a reality in the fields and valleys and moun-
tains of Virginia and Pennsylvania, of
Massachusetts and New Hampshire, and

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right here in this historic place, in the Middle Brook, in what became Vermont. And on the eve of this Thanksgiving festival, we have paused a moment to assemble in this meetinghouse to thank God for the heritage we have received from one Nathaniel Niles, and from so many like him who settled this valley, and all the hillsides and valleys round about — to thank God for the land he has given us for our home, and to thank him seeing us safe through another year.

And, as we pause to give thanks, may we also pledge ourselves anew to those ideals for which they stood and for which they labored, especially those uniquely Christian; and let us pray God that in the year to come, when so much will depend on what we do and say and on how we work and how we vote, and on how we treat our neighbors in other lands — let us pray that we remain true to their ideals and put them to work every day of our lives.

One word of postscript, in a world that has grown bigger and faster since the time when Nathaniel Niles walked this valley and preached the first word of Christ's love here, we are sometimes inclined to think that one person doesn't make any difference any more. Washington, Moscow, Cambodia, Iran — and even the slums of Boston or New York — all seem a long way off. And yet, I never come into this valley and see it as it must have been long ago without marvelling at the influence of one person like Niles. Remember — in his day there were no trains, no cars, no buses; there were no telephones or telegraph, no radio nor television; the nearest mail even at the time of his death came only as close as Post Mills. Yet, by God's grace, and because he was dedicated to the principles of Christ,

and to the best aspects of patriotism, Niles and men and women like him made their influence felt. They proclaimed and worked for charity and justice and liberty against all odds, and, as far as their influence was felt, their ideals prospered, and New England became a schoolhouse of liberty and justice for the whole world.

The world may have grown bigger and the pace of life faster since then, but the heritage of God's truth is the same. It is preserved and nurtured, if it is to survive at all, in individual Christians and individual citizens like you and me. We can preserve it, or we can let it die out. And die it surely will, when we cease to work for it, or if we let self-interest take the place of a common concern for the good and the rights of all. But, if we will dedicate ourselves to it once again and work faithfully to preserve it every day of the coming year, we will each do our part to keep that heritage alive and to make the whole world a better and more lovely place in which to live. For the promise that God delivered to Moses at the edge of the Promised Land is the same promise that he delivered to those hardy Christians who came to settle these mountain valleys; and he renews that promise to us and to ours on the eve of this Thanksgiving day:

Therefore, you shall keep all the commandments that I have commanded you this day, that you may be strong, and go in and take possession of the land which you are going over to occupy, and that you may live long in the land which the Lord has promised to your fathers, to give to them and to their descendents. For if you are careful to love the Lord your God and to walk in all his ways, and to remain loyal to him, no man shall be able to prevail against you.