

# These Pilgrims remind us of our progress

by John Pixley

**T**he golden leaves all but glittered on the green grass. There was a brisk snap in the air. At long last.

Fall came, at long last, on that Friday last month—I had to put another blanket on my bed, finally, that night—appropriately enough, the first day of the Pilgrim Place Festival. It came only after it rained that morning, just after the festival opened with a brass band playing.

It wasn't supposed to rain that day, one person after another said. I bought my annual persimmons and some other things—the festival is a cool place for Christmas shopping—as it began sprinkling, and the sprinkling just got heavier. I didn't hear anyone talk of leaving or breaking down, but, when I got home with my rain cape on and with the rain falling harder, I wondered if the Pilgrims would be washed out after all their preparations. Such a shame.

But, before long, it was sunny again. I decided to return in the afternoon. I had heard and read that the pageant was not only completely revamped and updated this year but also now included music by the Pilgrim Pickers. I wanted to see this, so I headed over, with the hope that the sun was out for a while, that the festival hadn't been shut down and that the show would go on.

It turned out that the festival was very much still going on, with cars parked blocks away and with the booths bustling with business. Not only that, but, along with the leaves shining on the lawn and the crisp snap in the air (or at least suggested and coming that night), there was a large crowd eagerly awaiting the 1:45 performance.

It also turned out that the new pageant was every bit as sparkly as those brilliant leaves on the green. It had almost been rained out but instead, as if with the rain, went on reinvigorated, full of bright ideas and with a renewed, inspiring message.

I have to be honest and say that I hadn't seen the pageant for years and years, perhaps since I was a



child. Even then, it was a bit musty—a straight-ahead re-enactment of the first Thanksgiving, weighed down with stuffy “thees” and “thous” and perhaps more than its fair share of stereotypes. I remember feeling even then that there was something a bit or very wrong about the Indians—the Native Americans—being painted red and festooned with feathers.

It had been my sense that people have watched the pageant because it was a tradition, if not duty. It was the thing to do at the Pilgrim Place Festival.

Not this year. And not only did these retired Christian missionaries rip a huge hole in the myth that senior citizens can't change. They gave us something, in an enjoyable, entertaining way, to think about and even to challenge us.

In this pageant, the first Thanksgiving was just the beginning, only a starting point. Two Pilgrims came on stage, ready for the usual tale, only to be confused by the presence of two modern-day narrators, a man and a woman, as well as the Pilgrim Pickers. To mollify the lost Pilgrims, the narrators offer to tell them what has gone on in this country since the first Thanksgiving.

A remarkable thing about the ensuing hour-long journey, accompanied by the Pickers' folk music and the audience singing along on many songs, was that it

showcased the work done by Pilgrim Place residents. One man spoke about working with Martin Luther King, Jr. A Japanese-American man talked about having to live in an internment camp. Another man spoke of his experience working with Cesar Chavez. The pageant ended, appropriately enough, with pageantry, a parade of men and women living in Pilgrim Place who have done much in the effort to bring about that community.

In front of me where I sat was a group of boys and girls sitting on the lawn, holding their balloons, guard-



## observer

not only hit America's high points—freedom, civil rights, etc.—but also its low points. It didn't shy away from telling of the Native Americans having their lands taken and being put on reservations, of black people being enslaved and then discriminated against, of Japanese-Americans being interned during World War II, of Mexican and other immigrant laborers being exploited. At one point, the narrators wondered how to explain the atom bomb to the two Pilgrims.

This all was certainly not meant to be depressing or to signal that the U.S. has failed. Indeed, the point of the presentation was that this country has always strived to get better. This was a review—truly a pageant—of America's on-going progress in trying to fulfill the original Pilgrims' vision of building the kingdom of God on Earth.

Yes, the kingdom of God. This was another remarkable thing about the play is that it didn't shy away from talking about God. A lot. But this wasn't the God that is heard of so much these days. This wasn't the exclusionary, threatening, side-talking God. This was the welcoming, embracing God, open to all. So, while the performance sometimes sounded like something going on in a church, it did not seem strange that it was out in the open.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder if there were people there who see this God as too accepting, too inclusive. I wondered what their God would do, what their Jesus would do. About women? I wondered. About gays? And what about the people who don't have a God, those who don't believe in God?

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**W**hat I heard being said in the performance, ultimately, was that all of these people were included in the original Pilgrims' vision. The blessed community is indeed open to all—people worshipping freely and in different ways or not at all—living together harmoniously.

Building and maintaining such a community is not easy and often requires much work. In illustrating this work, this striving, this progress, the new pageant

ing their Glue-in creations, while they ate sandwiches brought from home and hamburgers and hot dogs purchased at the Festival. They eventually wandered off—the boys first, of course, followed by the girls—but before doing so, they were clearly drawn in by what was happening on the stage, singing along with the large audience.

On this beautiful day shared by all, saved by and saved from the refreshing rain, this was truly a pageant, reminding us of the goodwill and hope of the season.