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Recycling a Colonial Puritan Sermon: A Case Study

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RECYCLING A COLONIAL PURITAN SERMON: A CASE STUDY

David M. Powers

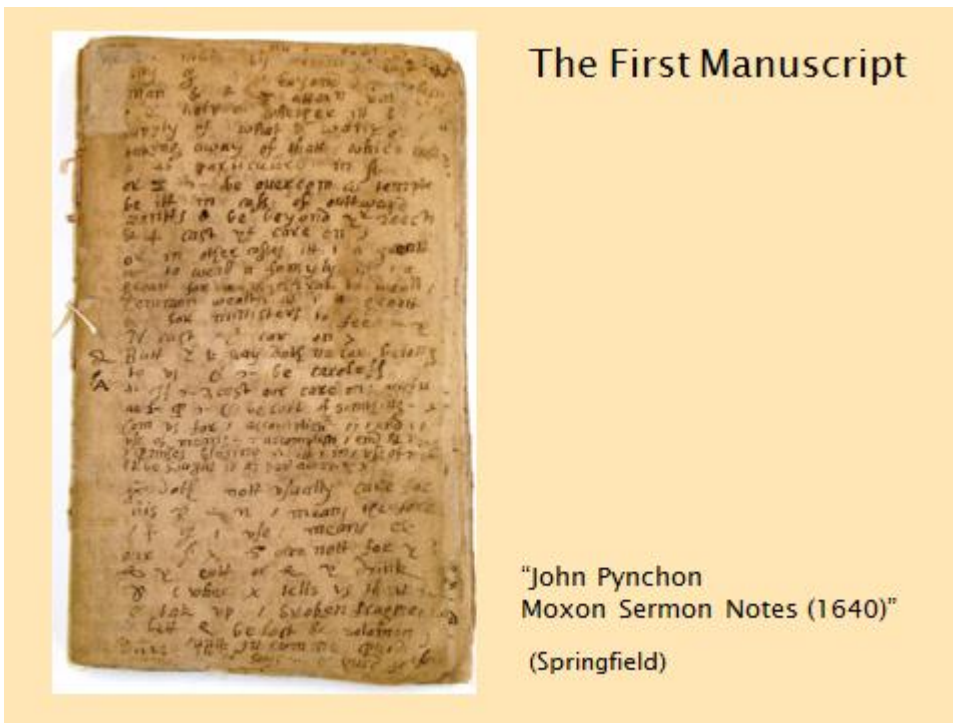
Sermon Studies Conference on “Sermon: Text and Performance,”
Center for Sermon Studies, Marshall University, Huntington, WV

October 19, 2017

“Recycling” historic sermons. I wonder how many of us have actually done that? How many of us think it is not a good idea, or simply not possible?

My work in recycling a colonial Puritan sermon provides an example of moving through an entire process from text to performance.

I begin with a manuscript mystery. It looks like this:



Except for a couple of pieces of household hardware and a couple of letters, the earliest English (that is, non-Native American) artifact from Springfield, Massachusetts, seems to be this small booklet of eighty pages, in the Lyman and Merrie Wood Museum of Springfield History. It is catalogued as “John Pynchon Moxon Sermon Notes 1640.”

Our story involves two people: The Rev. George Moxon (1602–1687), who came in late 1637 to be Springfield’s first minister, and John Pynchon (1625?-1703), the only son of William Pynchon, who arrived in the Connecticut River Valley when his father established a plantation and trading post there in 1636. John was 14 or 15 years old when he took the notes in this booklet. John recorded his first notes in the largest room of his family’s home on Fort Street, where the small community gathered for

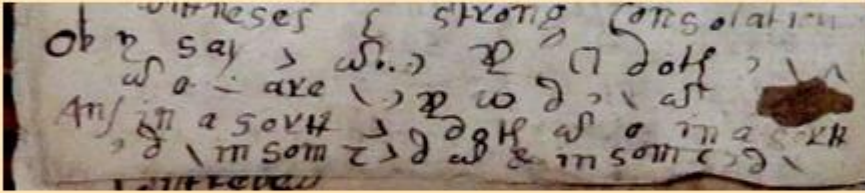
civic and church meetings. He probably did this as a homework assignment of sorts. The exercise would help him to learn to listen, to understand and embrace the Puritan theological outlook, and to speak well publicly, with an accomplished orator as his model.



By 1645 the community built a meeting house. A replica in Simsbury, CT, has two stories and two turrets, as did the Springfield meeting house—though the Springfield structure on Court Square was probably a half-timbered building, as in the sketch.

But John's manuscript presents a problem.

The problem:



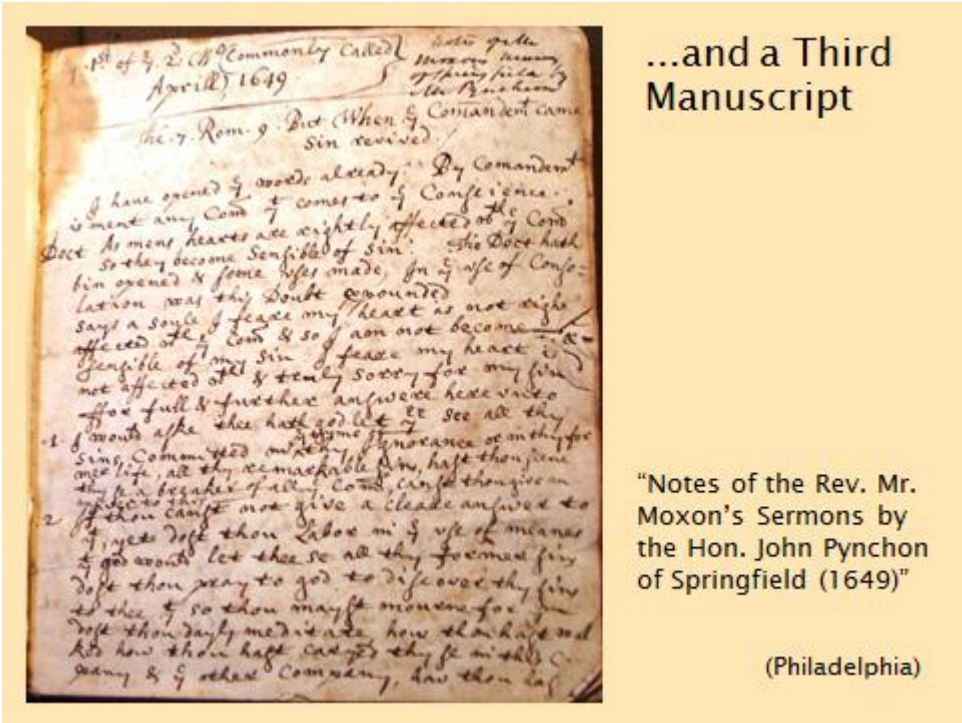
What does it say?

John wrote in what was called “short writing.” Recording conversations through shorthand notes was all the rage in the early 17th century. But John wrote in a shorthand of his own invention. How to figure it out?

The portion above can be rendered, “Objection: you say God comforts his people. But doth he not also comfort those that are not his people? What? Doth he not all? Answer: In a sort God doth comfort them; in a sort, not. In some regards God doth comfort and in some regards he doth not.”

Using symbols for these 49 words takes up far less space, which is one good reason for using a code. It also takes less time to write down what was said. John was what Meredith Neuman in her important study of sermon notetakers, *Jeremiah's Scribes*, calls an “aural auditor.”¹ John wrote what he heard as he tried to capture exactly what was said. Sometimes his spelling even reveals the preacher's Yorkshire accent: “together,” “Benjamean,” “steps” (for “steps.”)

My first breakthrough came with this section:



...and a Third Manuscript

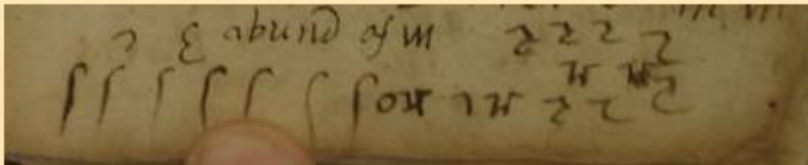
"Notes of the Rev. Mr. Moxon's Sermons by the Hon. John Pynchon of Springfield (1649)"

(Philadelphia)

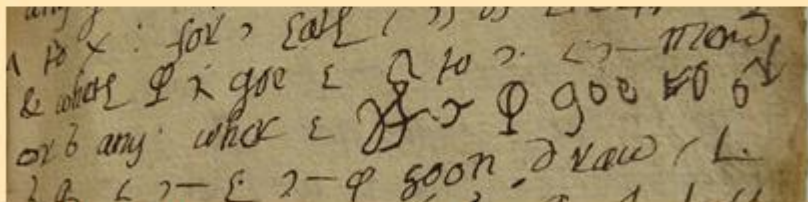
And somewhere along the way, I found out about a manuscript in Philadelphia of more of John's notes, bound in a booklet, written in a much clearer hand, and labelled "Notes of the Rev. Mr. Moxon's Sermons by the Hon. John Pynchon of Springfield (1649)."

There are a number of fun peculiarities here and there in John's notes:

Some peculiarities:



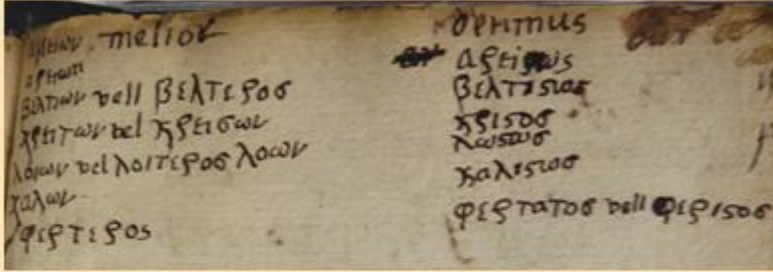
pen tests and fancy lettering



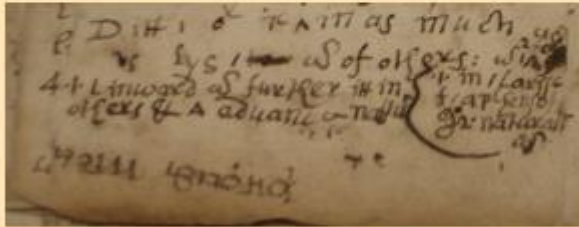
writing with non-dominant hand – December 27, 1640

The manuscript contains instances of pen tests and attempts at fancy writing. There's one place where I think John must have been trying to write with his non-dominant hand. (The symbols with irregular,

wavering lines in the middle on the right side above can be rendered, “If we should go to our [selves]...”)



Greek homework



some extraneous comments - “proud men”

There’s a snippet of John’s homework in Greek—the comparatives and superlatives of adjectives. And a very few extraneous comments written upside-down. Here you can see, at the bottom of a page, “proud men” (which did not happen to be the topic of the sermon that day).

afternoon --- >
June 3, 1649

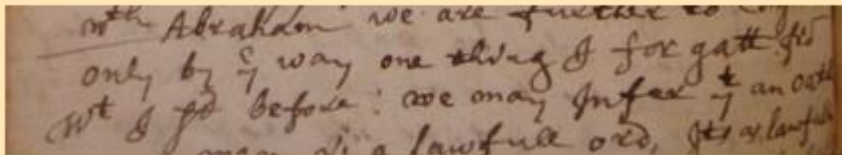


one too many ales
for lunch?

And a couple of times in the 1649 notes, when John was 23 or 24 years old, his handwriting became such a scrawl in his afternoon jottings that I have to wonder if he may have had one too many ales at lunch.

And here's my favorite:

"- Only, by the way, one thing I forgot from what I said before . . ."



On July 8, 1649, Pynchon wrote, and Moxon must have said, "Only, by the way, one thing I forgot from what I said before. . ."

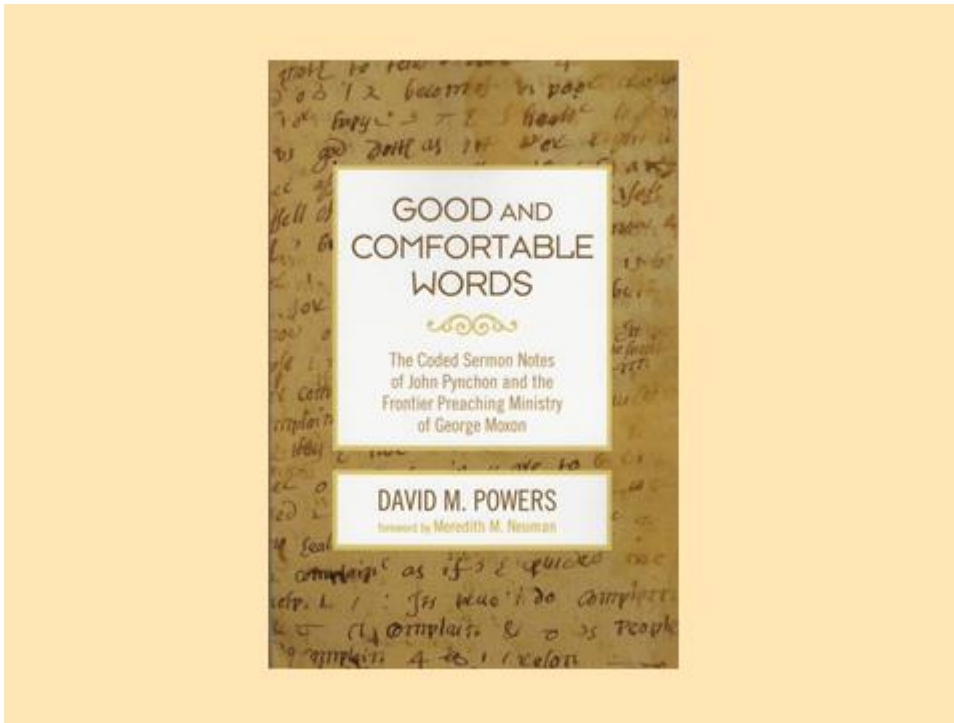
JOHN PYNCHON - SHORT WRITING SYMBOLS (1640)

α	according	D	doctrine	[word], -ness	⊃	that
A	affliction/s	∩	down	n	/	the, thee
g	against	7 ^c	duty	\	o	them
o	all	C	earth	e	ω	there, their
A a	also	ε	else	N	/.	these
^	among	T	enough	@	∫	they
π	another	e	ever	∞	∫	thing
∪	because	e	every	A	4	think
B	before?	f	faith	P	6	this
B	believe	#	father	for	o	those
Q	between	L	for, -ful	→	Z	thou

some of John Pynchon's short-writing symbols

All in all, I was able to decipher 120 or so symbols, which made it possible to create a transcription. Though I have to admit, a few symbols which John used only once do still elude me.

From an unpunctuated, word-for-word transcription of a symbol-for-symbol manuscript, I then created a punctuated text, using contemporary documentary editing practices for unreadable or unknown or uncertain words. The three manuscripts, plus a forty-page introduction, provide enough for a 200-plus page book that contains transcriptions of thirty-six sermons. *Good and Comfortable Words: The Coded Sermon Notes of John Pynchon and the Frontier Preaching Ministry of George Moxon* (2017) is available from Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR.

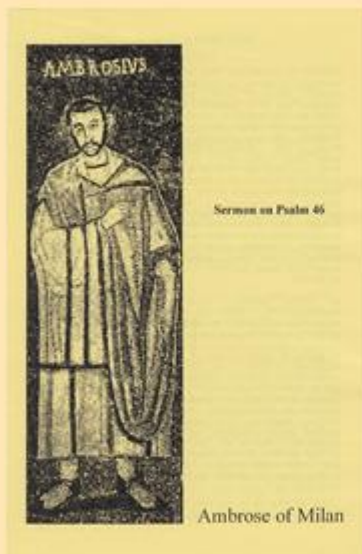


But sermons are meant to be heard. They are meant to be preached! So, I did preach a Moxon sermon, from February 23, 1640, in Coventry, Connecticut in June, 2017.



Presenting the February 23, 1640 sermon – Coventry, CT, June 9, 2017

I've done something like this before. Once I presented sermons by Ambrose of Milan² and Martin Luther, during a church's centennial year.



other historic sermons

A Luther sermon might also be appropriate during the 500th anniversary of the *Ninety-Five Theses* in the fall of 2017. In the sermon I presented in 1996, Luther said, “Here I stand.” (Actually, he said, “That’s why I’m standing here—and not taking any money for it, either.”)³ I’ve done other presentations as well. One was a sermon by a predecessor of my own in a church I served, Nathan Stone,⁴ whose manuscript somebody left in a book at the recycling exchange at the dump in a

neighboring village. That really was a recycled sermon! I've also done the Swiss reformer Martin Bucer,⁵ and the Pilgrims' pastor, John Robinson.⁶ The Bucer and Robinson sermons were developed from essays which seem to have been based on sermons.

Now to the wider subject of presenting historical sermons—bringing words from then into the now. (By the way, there isn't very much at all written on this topic.) It seems to me several important considerations are involved in developing a text for presenting an historic sermon.

1. Legitimacy: We can identify several compelling reasons for presenting historic sermons. Marking a noteworthy anniversary. Acquainting worshippers today with an important strand of denominational history. Commemorating a particularly notable member of the clergy from the past. Celebrating liturgical continuity over the decades—what has remained; and the very opposite: highlighting innovations—what has changed.

2. Another consideration: Theological discretion: Not every historical sermon available for performance today bears repeating in a worship setting. If the message is no longer valid in any way for contemporary congregations; if it will evoke a response of cultural superiority; or if its message will be dismissed because the intervening years have made it irrelevant or comical or inauthentic in some other way, it will fail as a sermon and must not be presented as a part of contemporary worship. If it's a sermon, say, against smoking, be very sure that you as presenter share that passion! It simply is not valid to play-act a sermon in church, because, for one thing, that would seriously short-change people who have come to worship God.

3. Another: Minding the gap: The gap between then and now can prove very difficult to navigate. It must be made clear how the history under consideration connects to present worshippers. Sharing the same tradition or geography as the sermon's original setting provide obvious possible links from past to present. However much theologies, hermeneutics, and rhetorical fashions evolve over time, I'm convinced that the core message of faithful preaching can hold up over the centuries, and actually prove encouraging as well as enlightening, compelling as well as curious, inspiring even if idiosyncratic for 21st century people.

So I suggest these steps for developing and presenting historic sermons.

A. Establish the text – Anything other than recordings (which simply don't exist throughout most of history) is a deduction, an inference, even an invention. The source may be a published text edited by the preacher or someone else, which could prove to be sterile as well as inaccurate. Or it could be handwritten notes by the minister, which may or may not be what was actually said. Or it could be notes by one or more individuals, which will inevitably be filtered by the interests and the "hearing" of the notetakers. In any case, all sources are at best only approximations.⁷

B. Create clarity in the script – Once a text has been established, it needs to be examined very carefully for words or phrases which may escape modern understanding. Intelligibility requires assistance. (I have some suggestions about that below).

C. Frame the performance – An intentional introduction before the service begins, or careful program notes to alert the congregation about what to expect as the service proceeds, or (probably best) both,

can address the distance between the “then” when the sermon was first written and the “now.” In addition to providing basic information, inviting the congregation to engage their imaginations may encourage a receptive mood.

D. Respect the tone – The tone of the original sermon, whatever it may be – whether proclamation of dogmatic propositions, or presentation of Biblical or denominational teaching, or raising questions about the hearers’ spiritual conditions, or a combination of all of those, and more – whatever the original tone, it should be carefully identified and valued by the presenter, and should be replicated, echoed in the modern performance.

E. De-brief – For maximum impact, some opportunity for reaction and response following the experience can provide a valuable opportunity for discussion. This will enable the presenter to address questions which may have arisen from the presentation, and help to underscore the significance of the exercise.

Let me add a few words about achieving clarity across the gap from then to now. I see several possible solutions.

1. If the text needs to be developed from an unedited MS, like the one I worked with, make minimal corrections where words which are obviously missing can be supplied, or singular and plurals, or tenses, which do not match can be modified. This seems the least intrusive way of amending the text for greater clarity.

2. Supplement archaic terms with modern words as the presentation is delivered—for instance, by adding “application” in apposition to “use.”

5. Provide annotations for terms or phrases which are no longer readily understood. Thus Moxon’s “pitch upon” is defined as “settle on” and “challenge” as “lay claim to.”

I did not make use of two further possibilities. One would be to update problematic words with modern equivalents. That involves tinkering with the text, and in a sense disrespecting it. Furthermore, changes which modernize inevitably distance the message from the world in which it originated.

Another possibility would be to supply a printed script of the message to all the hearers, possibly with footnotes for words which have evolved in meaning since the original sermon. But I expect that would result in the congregation’s eyes being glued to the printed form throughout the presentation.



The opening paragraphs of John Pynchon's notes, sermon of February 23, 1640. (The date in the manuscript is according to the Julian calendar then in use, when the old year ended on March 24.)

ARCHAIC WORDS AND PHRASES

Almost all the words in Moxon's sermon mean today what they meant when he originally preached it. The following are expressions which may puzzle modern hearers. They are listed here in the order in which they are used in the sermon:

pitch upon = settle on

write upon = make a record of

justify = confirm by evidence

testimony = evidence

sum up = summarize

unbottom = stop depending on

challenge = lay claim to

church condition = being bound together in covenant as church members

close with Christ = confess faith in and reliance on Christ

providences = instances of God's intervention in one's life or in the world

comfortable issue = good outcome, positive result

So, as preparation for Coventry, Connecticut—and preparation is crucially important!—I developed a bulletin insert which included a couple of visual illustrations, a little background information, and a glossary to help with unfamiliar vocabulary. I listed the unfamiliar words in the order in which they occurred in the sermon.

Here is the other side:

23 A Psalm of David.
The Lord to me a shepherd is,
 I was therefore shall not L.
 1 Not in the fold of tender grass,
 doth cause mee downe to lie
 To waters calmes me gently leads
 2 Refresh my soule doth hee:
 he doth in paths of righteousness
 for his names sake leade mee.
 3 Yes though in valley of death shade
 I walk, none ill I feare
 because thou art with mee, thy rod,
 and staffe my comfort are.
 4 For mee a table thou hast spread,
 in presence of my foes:
 thou dost annoy my head with oyle,
 my cup it over-flowes.
 5 Goodnes & mercy surely shall
 all my dayes follow mee
 and in the Lords house I shall dwell
 so long as dayes shall bee.

The Bay Psalm Book (1640)

Our Service Today

OUR SERMON TODAY was originally preached on February 23, 1640 in the frontier community of "Agawam upon the Connecticut," which two years later would be renamed Springfield. It was a Sunday message by the Rev. George Moxon (1602-1687), the settlement's first pastor.

Notes in coded "short writing" by the teenaged John Pynchon (1625?-1703), the son of Springfield's founder William Pynchon (1590-1662), provide a witness' record. Once deciphered, John's notes have been transcribed using contemporary spelling and punctuation. In attempting to write everything he heard, John produced an extensive record of the preacher's vocabulary and phrases. His exact original order has been retained. A handful of words have been sparingly added for the sake of clarity.

The sermon includes all the usual features of Puritan preaching. A Bible verse serves as the Text. Doctrines are stated and explained. Proofs in the form of supporting Bible verses are given. Finally, Uses or Applications are specified.

This sermon was the second of five which Moxon gave in a "continuum" on the same verse, from February 16 through March 16, 1640.

The Opening Prayer is by the Rev. Richard Baxter (1615-1691) from his *Savoy Liturgy* (1661). The "Long Prayer" is based on the Puritan *Middleburg Liturgy* of 1587.

How did it work out? In brief, everybody took it in stride. Some asked good questions during the sermon response time, a feature of some New England Puritan liturgies, which was included in the service. Some gave written feedback on a brief form I distributed as people left the sanctuary at the end of the service. From these responses I discovered that I will need to adapt a bit further for any future presentations. In particular, I need to adjust a few places which sound like repetitions in the original (even though they actually are not).



But my experience was such that I am certainly encouraged to try again.⁸



¹ Meredith M. Neuman, *Jeremiah's Scribes: Creating Sermon Literature in Puritan New England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

² From *Ennaratio in Psalmus XLV* ("Commentary on Psalm 46"). Presented October 3, 1982, Dennis, MA, and February 4, 1996, Briarcliff Manor, NY.

³ Erfurt, Germany, April 7, 1521, on John 20:19-31. Presented October 30, 1983, Dennis, MA, and April 14, 1996, Briarcliff Manor, NY.

⁴ Sermon # 437, November 6, 1791, on Acts 13:23. Presented October 17, 1982, Dennis, MA

⁵ From "*That No One Should Live for Himself but for Others, How to Attain to This Ideal*" (1523). Presented October 10, 1982, Dennis, MA.

⁶ "Of Created Goodness," from *New Essays* (1628). Presented November 25, 2012, Orleans, MA.

⁷ In the case of John Pynchon's notes on the Moxon sermons, we can have a higher level of confidence in the exactness of his records because, as an aural auditor, John wrote everything he could just as he heard it. In 1640 that included words he misunderstood, probably because he as a teenager did not recognize them. I believe that suggests a high likelihood that Moxon did use them.

⁸ My gratitude to the people of First Congregational Church UCC in Coventry, CT, and their interim minister, the Rev. Stephen Washburn, for the opportunity to preach a sermon from February 16, 1640 on July 9, 2017.