



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THANKSGIVING DAY
NOVEMBER 25, 2021

JOEL 2:21-27; PSALM 126; 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-7; MATTHEW 6:25-33

THANKSGIVING DAY— TOUCHSTONE AND TRUTH



Last month Kathy and I spent a few days
on the shores of southern Massachusetts,

just a few miles from Plymouth to which
we made a visit keenly aware that this fall

¹ Massasoit Sachem (aka Ousamequin), the Wampanoag Indian chief who strived for peaceful relations with the English in the area of Plymouth, Massachusetts, visits the Pilgrims. (Bettman / Getty).

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/11/thanksgiving-belongs-wampanoag-tribe/602422/>

we observe the 400th anniversary of the “first Thanksgiving.” If we are to believe what we were taught in grade school, it was a delightful fete of pilgrims and Indians celebrating the harvest with a feast of abundance. A lovefest of peaceful co-existence. Gratitude and mutuality at a common table has long been at the core of the narrative.

Our childhood memories of construction paper pilgrim hats and feathered head bands notwithstanding, and whatever other overlays we may have of Plymouth Rock and the Mayflower’s contingent, it is time to face the truth that our long-embraced mythology of those origins of a “Happy Thanksgiving” is tragically misguided.²

Overlooking Plymouth Bay today is a tall statue of Ousamequin, the Wampanoag chief, who stands in silent watch still over the masses who file past the monument to Plymouth Rock and onto a replica of the Mayflower. In 1620 it was Ousamequin

who watched as Europeans came ashore, that time with women and children, a sign he thought meant they came in peace. For decades his tribe had been met with hostility and violence from early explorers who also brought a viral pandemic which had killed half his tribe whose villages extended throughout present-day southeastern Massachusetts, Cape Cod, and most of Rhode Island.

The Wampanoag would assist this new band of white people in planting beans and corn, teaching them indigenous practices of farming and living off the land. Those English families that survived the brutal first winter would have a good harvest in 1621, thanks in large part to the Wampanoag, and they planned a traditional three-day feast. The Indians were not invited. When muskets were fired in their revelry, the Wampanoag rushed to the scene, and upon seeing the feast, faded into the forests and returned with several deer, their offering for the

² Two articles that offer some detail in the origins of our narrative are: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-the-traditional-thanksgiving-feast-has-evolved-over-centuries> and

<https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/this-tribe-helped-the-pilgrims-survive-for-their-first-thanksgiving-they-still-regret-it-400-years-later/>

cause of celebration, and they ate. Historians dispute how welcome they really were; it is almost certain they were not invited to sit at the same table as their counterparts. Our grade school fetes do not speak the truth.

The Mashpee Wampanoag descendants of the 21st Century do not celebrate Thanksgiving Day; instead they observe a day of mourning, because within two decades of that first feast, most were victims of ruthless colonialism—displaced from their land, or forced to assimilate, or dead. The story is replayed across the continent, as we know, but it is a part of our narrative, and I hope you will talk about it at your table of abundance today. Speak the truth, even as we hold the space for gratitude. We can do both.

It's important to note that this mythology which we have been fed for most of our lives did not gain a prominent place in our nation's history until 200 years ago, when Christians looking to establish a National Day of Thanksgiving saw the pilgrim narrative as ammunition for their cause. It worked, and it was Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War who declared the

fourth Thursday in November Thanksgiving Day in hopes of glossing over the schism and forge a homogenized national practice.

Four score years later, Franklin Roosevelt wanted to move it a week earlier to allow for more days to shop for Christmas. Black Friday was born as the economic twin of Thanksgiving Day. Congress finally declared in 1941 that the last Thursday in November shall be a national holiday of Thanksgiving.

So here we are today, in church, lifting our prayers of gratitude and familiar hymns of thanksgiving to God, even as we surely have thoughts of the soporific feast to come dancing in our heads. What are we to do with all this?

Well, I am reminded that the nascent research in the field of epigenetics has demonstrated that the experience of violence and trauma can change the DNA that is passed to future generations, but so can the experience of gratitude. Practicing gratitude, as I explored in a sermon last month, makes a difference to the one practicing gratitude and perhaps to their progeny.

We were created with hearts of gratefulness, my friends, but we need touchstones to invite us into the practice with intention. That is what the Eucharist is—a touchstone of thanksgiving, a ritual of gratefulness. But notice that the Eucharistic Prayer does not gloss the truth that Jesus suffered and died. We speak the truth here, we rehearse the story, so that we can integrate it, so that it might change our beings, all the way down to our DNA and deeper even, to our souls, so that we know God as the source of life and the ground of being.

The pattern is there for us today as well—Thanksgiving Day is intended as a touchstone, but in this time of reckoning, four hundred years on, it is high time to deconstruct the narrative and learn a truer version, no longer glossing the real history. We speak the truth around this table; I hope you will around your tables later today. Rehearse the story that holds the suffering, too, and be changed by it, and by the practice of gratitude that we hone today, so that your children and your children’s children may unfold to a world more healed, more whole.

May it be so, with God’s help. Amen.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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