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Strangers, Saints and Indians

Squanto was 'sent of God,' wrote Pilgrim Governor William Bradford.

By John A. Murray

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There's little question that we live in a hyperpartisan country, and it might seem that only divine intervention can bring about the cooperation needed to move our nation forward. Perhaps in this light we might pause to remember it was only the cooperation of some very unlikely parties that made possible the first Thanksgiving.

The Pilgrims who set sail for the New World on the Mayflower in September 1620 embodied two groups: the Saints and the Strangers. The Saints were Christians who had fled England to Holland. Although they lived free of the religious intolerance of King James I, the Saints were still not happy with their Dutch surroundings. They sought a place where their children could be raised both Christian and English.

The Strangers, on the other hand, had no concern for religious freedom. These merchants, tradesmen and servants chiefly sought economic opportunity in the New World.

As we read from the historical accounts, the voyage was difficult and the first winter dire. At one point, only a small group of adults was strong enough to care for the others and oversee the building of the main common house. Miraculously, all 30 children survived.

When spring arrived, nearly half of the original 102 were dead from lack of food and medicine. Many of the survivors debated whether to sail back to England.

But on one early afternoon in March, as Captain Miles Standish was discussing defense plans in case of an Indian attack, a visitor appeared at the door of the common house. Surprisingly, it was an Indian.

Samoset—who had learned to speak some English from a British sea captain who'd made an earlier voyage to what is now Maine—greeted them. He told them a large, hostile tribe, the Patuxets, had cleared the land they now inhabited but had been completely wiped out by a mysterious disease four years before. As a result, no Indian tribe would settle the area.

This unusual event—and what happened next—is recounted by Pilgrim Governor William Bradford in his work "Of Plymouth Plantation":



"About the 16th of March [1621], a certain Indian came boldly amongst them and spoke to them in broken English," Bradford wrote. Samoset "told them also of another Indian whose name was Squanto, a native of this place, who had been in England and could speak better English than himself. . . . Squanto continued with them and was their interpreter and was a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation."

"Sent of God?" That sounds quaint to modern ears. But consider Squanto's story. Many years before the arrival of the Pilgrims, he and several other Patuxet Indians had been kidnapped along the New England coast and transported to Spain to be

Native American Indian Squanto serving as a guide for pilgrim colonists. GETTY IMAGES
 sold into slavery. Providentially, Squanto was purchased by a group of Catholic friars who

taught him about the Bible and Jesus Christ in preparation to send him back to America to be a missionary among his tribe.

After Squanto completed his Christian education, the friars freed him and enabled him to make his way to England. Learning English while working aboard British ships, he boarded a ship in 1619 to return to America. Upon his arrival Squanto learned of the Patuxets' untimely demise.

With Squanto's help, the Pilgrims were able to survive their first year. He taught them agriculture and fishing. As an interpreter, he also helped the Pilgrims establish a peace with the local Indian tribes that would last for close to 50 years.

In the fall of 1621, the Pilgrims reaped a bountiful harvest. To thank God for their deliverance and the help they had received from the Indians, Bradford held a three-day Thanksgiving feast inviting the Indians to join them in their celebration.

Squanto remained friendly with the Pilgrims until he succumbed to an unknown fever and died in 1622. Amazingly, he bequeathed his possessions to the Pilgrims, as Bradford would document, "as remembrances of his love."

Considering the trials of his own life, it would have been understandable for Squanto to sow bitterness and seek war against the Pilgrims. Instead, his generosity and forgiveness enabled their survival.

Exemplifying St. Paul's challenge to "not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good," Squanto's cooperation would not be forgotten by the Pilgrims. Nor should it today.

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