

THE FIRST THANKSGIVING CELEBRATION

A tall, silent figure stood for a long time in the shadowy forest before he joined the crowd of people beginning to celebrate. Squanto thought back on the dramatic events that led him to this time and place.

His family of the Patuxet tribe had lived on the land where he now stood. He had played here as a boy. It was where he learned to hunt and fish and plant corn.

It was also where he had first heard the strange English language spoken by a very different group of white people than the Pilgrims. About ten years earlier, in 1614, some friendly-acting English sailors landed in what is now Plymouth, Massachusetts. They traded with his tribespeople and then lured Squanto and some of his friends onto their ship where they kidnapped all of them and sailed away.

Thomas Hunt, the captain of this band, wrote in his journal about sailing their ship to Malaga, Spain, where they sold some of their captives as slaves.

Fortunately, Squanto and a few others were rescued by Spanish monks who taught them to read and write and speak Spanish. These men were different than the slavers! They were committed to helping the poor, feeding the hungry, and caring for the captives. From the monks' teaching, Squanto learned about a Creator-God. He heard about forgiveness and he began to discover a personal relationship to this God.

When he finally learned to communicate in Spanish, he told the monks his story and they helped him to get to England. There he learned English and found a ship on which he could return to his home.

Sadly, when he got back to his village in 1619, he discovered that his whole tribe, including his family, had vanished, probably due to a terrible pandemic virus perhaps brought by his kidnapers. Massasoit, the chief of the Pananoket, a neighboring tribe, allowed him to live with them.

Then in 1620, the "Mayflower" sailed into Cape Cod Bay and then north to the area of Plymouth. Most of the people on this ship spoke English! Squanto was understandably careful to avoid any contact with them for fear they were like his kidnapers. For almost a year, he watched them from hidden vantage points in the forest.

When the Pilgrims set sail from England to America, they had planned to land much farther south in Virginia. There, they would have been met by established immigrants; but fierce storms drove their ship north into Plymouth.

The Mayflower Pilgrims were totally unprepared for the difficult challenges that they faced. Trees had to be cut down and the land cleared before they could plant fields for the crops that they needed to harvest for winter food. Houses had to be built.

The growing season was much shorter than they expected and the seeds that they brought from Europe would not grow in the different soil.

Snowfall came early that year and it was much colder than they had expected. They ran out of food. The hardships were overwhelming! Many people fell ill and half of their community died during that first winter.

Feelings of dread often gripped them when they saw dark figures in the forest but they were unable to communicate.

Squanto watched the Pilgrims struggle with the pain of so many deaths and with their lack of survival skills.

The freezing winter air often carried the sound of their songs and prayers to his ears and into his heart. He remembered the monks who helped save him and his friends from slavery. Like the monks, the Pilgrims sang about Jesus' birth, life and how his victory over death opened the doors to heaven and to freedom! These people were definitely different from the men who had kidnapped him and his friends and sold them as slaves!

The Pilgrims never seemed to forget that they had prayed to be free to worship God without persecution and that their hopes had come true in this new world, even if not in the way that they had expected.

Gradually, Squanto accepted that the newcomers truly wanted to live at peace with the tribes. He told Chief Massasoit about their wish for living as good neighbors.

Under the trees, Squanto smiled to himself when he remembered the spring day in 1621 when he decided not only to trust the Pilgrims but also to help them. They were shocked and rather frightened when he walked into their camp and spoke clearly to them in English and offered to help them communicate with the Pananoket tribe!

This offer led to introducing the Pilgrim leaders William Bradford, Edward Winslow, and Miles Standish to Chief Massasoit and the other tribal leaders.

A peace treaty resulted from their meeting together and that peace held during the lifetime of the leaders.

Several Pilgrims later wrote about Squanto's help in their journals. They reported that he was an intelligent, good teacher, translator, mediator, advisor, and arbitrator between the Pilgrims and the neighboring tribes. He showed them how to plant three kernels of corn with a small fish that became fertilizer for the corn as it grew. He helped them hunt for meat and gather wild herbs for food.

They hadn't known about beaver and they were thankful when Squanto taught them how to trap and skin them and use the fur for clothes and blankets. The Pilgrims quickly recognized that this was a trading item that they could sell to repay the money they had borrowed for their trip.

Finally, Squanto took a deep breath and walked out of the forest to join his friends for THE FIRST THANKSGIVING to celebrate friendship and a good harvest.

He felt truly GRATEFUL that out of the terrible evils he had suffered, some goodness had come into the world.

Written by Ann Winslow Peddicord for Thanksgiving 2020

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