

READING: *A False Story of Discovery*, by Rev. Myke Johnson

“Every October and November in the United States, we find ourselves in a season of false and misleading stories about European settlers and Native Americans. First there’s the story that Columbus discovered America in 1492. Then there’s the story about the Pilgrims and the Indians at the first Thanksgiving.

It is astonishing, after all the work done by Native activists and their allies, that these stories keep returning unchanged year after year. Perhaps many people are willing to acknowledge, if pressed, that when Columbus supposedly “discovered” America, it was already full of people. But that “discovery” has a more sinister history that’s not often talked about.

Prior to 1492, European church leaders and monarchs had collaborated in a stunning series of proclamations, which became known as the Doctrine of Discovery. In 1452, the Pope declared that the king of Portugal had the right to conquer any Muslim and pagan peoples and enslave them. A few years later, a second letter declared that all the Christian kings of Europe had the right to take the lands and possessions of any non-Christian people, and keep them in perpetuity. If the pagan inhabitants could be converted to the Christian faith they might be spared, but otherwise they could be enslaved or killed. The Doctrine of Discovery was also later claimed by England in 1496, authorizing English explorers to seize any lands not already discovered by other Christian nations.

The Doctrine of Discovery became the legal basis for the “discoveries” of Columbus and others, and for the resulting attempts to conquer and colonize the western hemisphere, unleashing genocide on its peoples. It was also the legal basis for the slave trade. Its influence did not remain in that distant past — it’s still a source of oppression to this day. It became the basis of U.S. Indian Law, beginning in 1823, when Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that “Christian people” who had “discovered” the lands of “heathens” had assumed the right of “dominion,” and thus had “diminished” the Indians’ rights to complete sovereignty as independent nations. He claimed Indians had merely a right of occupancy in their lands. This decision has never been overturned, and is still cited on a regular basis in Federal court.

Responding to the requests of Indigenous peoples, several religious denominations have passed resolutions to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery — including Unitarian Universalists, in 2012. These resolutions are a first step toward reckoning with this history of stolen lands and stolen children.”

SERMON: *Whose Story is it?* by Rev. Dave Egan

This time of year, we love to teach our children stories about the birth of the United States. So the story goes, it all begins with that brave explorer named Christopher Columbus. Perhaps you remember this poem from grade school...

In fourteen hundred ninety-two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

He had three ships and left from Spain;
They sailed through sunshine, wind and rain.

Day after day they looked for land;
They dreamed of trees and rocks and sand.

October 12 their dream came true,
You never saw a happier crew!

"Indians! Indians!" Columbus cried;
His heart was filled with joyful pride.

The Arawak natives were very nice;
They gave the sailors food and spice.

Columbus sailed on to find some gold
To bring back home, as he'd been told.

The first American? No, not quite.
But Columbus was brave, and he was bright.

End of story. It's simple. Easy enough for children to understand. So simple that my daughters were taught this story in kindergarten, and are re-taught this story in school every October. Perhaps your children are being taught this story too.

But as I am sure you are aware, this story is not entirely accurate.

When Columbus and his crew finally found land and people living on that land, it wasn't quite as simple as:

“The Arawak natives were very nice; They gave the sailors food and spice.”

While there is some truth to this story, it carefully omits the parts of the story that are unpleasant, the parts that we simply don't want to think about, the parts that make us, people of European descent, feel uncomfortable.

So this story has been sanitized for our listening pleasure. That way we can all easily get behind this origin story, that tells of how those from Europe first made it to the western hemisphere.

As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, the author of *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, explains:

“All modern nation-states claim a kind of rationalized origin story upon which they fashion patriotism or loyalty to the state. The United States is not unique among nations in forging an origin myth. But most of its citizens believe it to be exceptional among nation-states, and this *exceptionalism ideology* has been used to justify appropriation of the continent and then domination of the rest of the world.”

This origin myth we tell ourselves about how America was *discovered* by the noble and brave Columbus, a good Christian man, who was simply fulfilling his God-given right of discovery and exploration, is important to our national psyche. For if we let go of seeing Columbus as the hero in our story, then we may have to begin questioning other problematic parts of our US history as well.

Well, we can't have that. For that may leave those of us of European decent with nagging feelings of guilt. It may even make us question just how “exceptional” we really are.

So let's look more closely at this man called Christopher Columbus. It is true that he and his crew weathered harsh storms and were able to survive a long and hard voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. I am sure that this took great grit and perseverance.

It is also true that in 1492, when they first landed on the island they decided to call “Espanola” (which is now known as the Dominican Republic and Haiti), they were greeted by members of the Arawak nation.

Thanks to Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish priest and a contemporary of Columbus who transcribed the explorer's journal, we know of Columbus's motivation at the time:

Columbus writes: "The Indians, have large communal bell-shaped buildings, housing up to 600 people at one time....They lack all manner of commerce, neither buying nor selling, and rely exclusively on their natural environment for maintenance. They are extremely generous with their possessions. With fifty men," calculated Columbus, "we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want."

After reporting his findings to the monarchy of Spain, Columbus returned to Espanola in 1493 with 17 ships and more than a thousand men. He planted a settlement of European soldiers on the island, who brutalized the indigenous Arawak nation, and then returned to Spain with 400 Arawak slaves.

Over the next 10 years, Columbus made voyages to what is now called Venezuela and the eastern coast of Central America. Each time planting colonies of men who invaded the local indigenous populations, raided their homes, killed anyone who got in their way, stole their gold, and then brought more indigenous slaves back to Europe.

Somehow this part of the story of Christopher Columbus, didn't make it into our poem, *In 1492 Columbus, sailed the ocean blue*.

But none the less, this is the man who we continue to celebrate on Columbus Day.

Columbus, and the other conquistadores who followed, such as Balboa, Ponce de Leon, Cortes, and many others... all operated under a theology that told them that this land belonged to them. These Christian men believed that they were the direct descendants of Abraham from the book of Genesis, and that God had chosen them to have dominion over the world.

If we look at the Hebrew Scriptures, which Christians co-opted and re-named the Old Testament, we will find this passage in the book of Genesis, Chapter 17:

God said to Abraham, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations."

This concept of being God's chosen people was fully embraced by Christians throughout the middle ages in Europe. This concept was a fundamental principle that allowed Christians to embark on the Crusades, and invade any nation that was perceived as pagan, or non-Christian. For as they saw it, this was God's will.

By the time Columbus sailed across the ocean blue in the 15th century, this was well-established church doctrine throughout Europe. As Rev. Myke Johnson explained in our reading this morning, this became known as the *The Doctrine of Discovery*.

“This doctrine declared that all the Christian kings of Europe had the right to take the lands and possessions of any non-Christian people, and keep them in perpetuity. If the pagan inhabitants could be converted to the Christian faith they might be spared, but otherwise they could be enslaved or killed.”

So in a very real sense, Columbus and the other conquistadores who saw themselves as God's chosen people, believed they were doing the right thing, the noble Christian thing... the thing that they believed their holy scripture instructed them to do... when they converted, killed or enslaved the Arawak, the Incas, the Mayans, the Navajo, the Wampanoag and hundreds of other indigenous populations throughout the western hemisphere.

This twisted ideology of Christian superiority, was still very much at play 400 years ago, when the Mayflower landed here in Massachusetts in 1620.

We like to tell ourselves that these white puritans who made the voyage were simply fleeing religious persecution from the Church of England, and just needed a new home to worship as they so pleased. They, along with Columbus, are the protagonists in our great American origin story. But when these puritans encountered the local Wampanoag population, the story does not end with a wonderful shared Thanksgiving feast, as our children are still being taught in school.

I'd like to show you the original seal of the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay created in 1629, just a few years after the first puritans arrived on these shores.



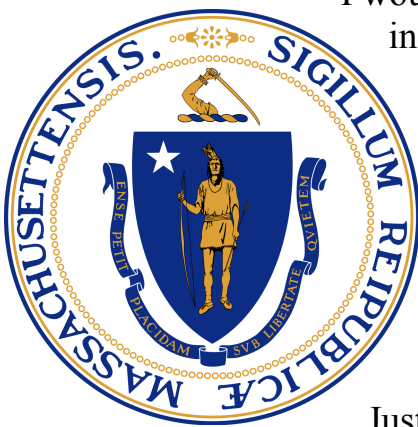
As you can see, it features a Native American man, who is generally considered to be an Algonquin, though not necessarily a member of any specific tribe native to Massachusetts. He is standing with a bow in his left hand, and a down-turned arrow in his right hand, which signifies a peaceable, or pacified, Native American. Coming from his mouth is a speech banner, saying “Come Over and Help Us.”

This original seal of the Mass Bay Colony fits neatly into the puritans view of their Christian superiority, their white supremacy... their notion that they, and they alone, are God’s chosen people. For they truly believed that these poor, backward savages, these non-christian pagans, just wanted their help.

Their Calvinist thinking went something like, “If only we can teach them the way of our Lord, then we will save their souls and they will be welcomed into God’s kingdom. But if we can’t convert them to christianity, then they are agents of the devil and must be put in hell.”

Unfortunately, this is type of thinking is not all in the past.

I would like to show you our current Massachusetts seal that is in the center of our flag representing the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.



The seal features a Native American holding a bow and arrow, again with the arrow pointed downward to signifies someone who is pacified. The Native figure on the seal is said to represent the Wampanoag tribe leader Ousamequin.

Just over the head of Ousamequin is a disembodied arm with a sword. The sword is modeled on Myles Standish’s broadsword, an image borrowed from the Pilgrim Hall in Plymouth Massachusetts. Myles Standish was the military commander for Plymouth Colony, known for killing Native Americans. Surrounding the seal is the phrase "Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem," which roughly translates from Latin to, "By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty.”

“By the sword, we seek peace.” This is the motto of our state. Today in 2019.

“By the sword, we seek peace.” In other words, we want peace, but we will kill you to get it.

The good news is that there is a movement, that began in 1977, to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day. So far the states of Alaska, Minnesota, Oregon, South Dakota, New Mexico, and most recently Vermont, Maine and Louisiana did in fact replace Columbus Day with Indigenous People's Day. Over a hundred other cities and towns across the country have made the same change.



But here in Massachusetts we have much work to do. While driving through Medfield I have often seen this mascot of the Medfield Warriors. It is similar to the Red Raiders mascot of North Quincy High School, where my eldest daughter is a student.

These cartoon depictions of Native Americans... whether they are sport logos or on our very own state flag... have been and continue to be used to mock indigenous populations whose ancestors were the victims of a systematic and centuries-long

mission of American genocide. A mission that is still going on today.

More good news: there is currently a bill before the legislature of Massachusetts that would ban these offensive and racist mascots. Speaking before the Massachusetts legislature a few months ago, Faries Gray of the Massachusett tribe said:

“Native mascots create an environment for our youth that is hostile and our youth that bear the brunt of that.”

“Your indigenous citizens are here to say that it is not acceptable to have us as a mascot. We are not novelties. We are not to be made fun of. We are to be honored,”

“We are to be honored.” After 500 years of genocide and oppression perpetrated against the indigenous peoples of the Americas, I don’t think it is too much to stop every once in a while and listen to their story... to stop making fun... to stop mocking. To stop saying this is all just the rantings of those politically-correct, liberal snowflakes.

It is time to start taking seriously the harm that was done, and to think deeply about what our role is in repairing what has been broken.

So may it be.

Amen.