

**It's Hard to Budge Plymouth Rock**  
**Psalm 136:1-9;23-36 and 2 Corinthians 11:16-33**  
**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**  
**November 18, 2018 (Thanksgiving Sunday)**

On three occasions, I have visited Plymouth Rock, which ostensibly marks the spot where the Pilgrims stepped ashore in the New World in 1620. The specific location, at Plymouth Harbor, on the coast of what is now Massachusetts, was verified in 1741 by Thomas France, a church elder who was at that time 94 years old. France insisted that his father, who had been one of the original Pilgrims, often identified the location and the Rock itself, during France's youthful years.

Anchored in the beach sand, surrounded by cement walls topped with iron bars, the impressive centerpiece of a fitting memorial--it's hard to budge Plymouth Rock. But in the early years, that was not always the case. One time, when the 10-ton granite behemoth was being moved, it broke in two. And over the centuries, souvenir hunters chipped away at it. One piece of the rock remains on a pedestal in the cloister of Plymouth Church, where the famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher served. For the last hundred years, the repaired rock has rested in its protective harbor-side monument, 4 tons of it visible above ground, 6 tons of it buried below the sand.

It's hard to budge Plymouth Rock!

When it comes to the annual observance of Thanksgiving in America, a certain popularly accepted and celebrated image of the original Thanksgiving persists, irrespective of the historical reality.

It's hard to budge ideas that are as entrenched in tradition as Plymouth Rock is in the sand!

We know that the cultural imperative of the Wampanoag tribe, who were then the Native Americans inhabiting the northern woodlands, was to offer charity to the helpless, and hospitality to anyone who came to them with empty hands. This was their natural response when they saw strange

ships arriving on the shore. It was the kindness of the Wampanoag that enabled the Pilgrims to survive the unfamiliar, harsh conditions in which they found themselves. And we know that Squanto, educated in Europe and baptized a Christian, heroically helped to save the fledgling settlement. Were our Pilgrim forbears equally charitable and unbiased toward the original residents of the New World?

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Chuck Larson, a teacher in Takoma, Washington, attempted to square reality and myth in an instructional manual on Thanksgiving, prepared for his professional peers. Larson is himself part Iroquois and part Algonquin. He poses some thought-provoking questions:

Were the Europeans the nobles we romanticize, or were they religious drop-outs?

Were they outcasts who did not fit into the mainstream of their society?

Were they the religiously persecuted or the religiously bigoted?

If they regarded the natives as friends, how then could the natives later be sold as slaves?

How ultimately were 700 children, women, and men of the Pequot nation slaughtered in their sleep near what is now Mystic, Connecticut?

In his definitive volume entitled "A Religious History of the American People", winner of the National Book Award, Sydney Ahlstrom states: *"The extension of settled areas...and the failure of most of the colonies to respect Indian rights led to the Pequot War of 1637."*

Where does Thanksgiving myth meet with historic reality?

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The most complete and illuminating first-hand account of the Pilgrims' journey, and their establishment in New England, is that of none other than William Bradford, in "A History of Plymouth

Plantation”: *“...what crosses, troubles, fears and sorrows they had been lyable unto...in perils of waters, perills of robbers, perills of their own nation, perills among the heathen, perills in the wilderness, perills in the sea, perills among false brethern, in wearines and painfulness, in hunger and thirst, in fasting often, in cold and nakedness.”*

Bradford notes the comparison of these travails to those recounted by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 11: 26-27: “On frequent journeys, (I was) in danger from rivers...from bandits...from my own people...from Gentiles...in the city...in the wilderness...at sea...from false brothers and sisters...in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.” But Paul might have acknowledged, as the Pilgrim leader Bradford did: *“What was it then that upheld them? It was God’s vissions that preserved their spirits!”*

A Rock! The Rock of Ages!

Indeed, it’s hard to budge such a Plymouth Rock!

As it happens on the Christian calendar this year, the observance of the Reign of Christ happens on next Sunday—the Sunday after Thanksgiving. The Reign of Christ is the final Sunday in the church year, which begins again with Advent in December. The Reign of Christ is a reminder that God’s decisive action is applicable to every time and every circumstance: the love, justice, and mercy of God as embodied in Jesus Christ liberates us from our failings and disappointments, even death, and offers us the grace to act with love, justice, and mercy ourselves. That is enough to be grateful for on this and any Thanksgiving holiday.

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With regard to the hallowed traditions, entrenched customs, and familiar abundance of Thanksgiving, it can be a challenge to square historic realities with long-standing myths. Jane Kamensky, Professor of History at Brandeis University, offers advice that serves to relieve such tension:

“To ask whether this is true (or that is true) is to ask the wrong question. Thanksgiving is true to its purposes. And that’s all it needs to be. For this holiday says much less about who we really were in some specific THEN, than about who we want to be in an ever changing NOW!”

It IS hard to budge Plymouth Rock!

So, as the feast commences on Thanksgiving Day, just pray that everyone around the table will seize each opportunity to embody the love, justice, and mercy so clearly demonstrated by God in Jesus Christ.