

“Searching for Sanctuary”

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First Church in Boston

A Charter Day Sermon

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A few weeks ago, while driving across the city, I discovered a hill that tells a story about Boston. Sitting in traffic on Washington Street, I looked past the sea of red taillights before me to the skyline above. Beside me was the towering stone mass of the Catholic Cathedral of the Holy Cross (dedicated in 1875), in the distance was the white wooden steeple of the First Church in Roxbury (founded by Puritans in the 1630’s) and in-between the other two steeples rose the slender minaret of the Islamic Society of Boston (opened their doors in 2009). Here in 3 religious spires is a story of Boston, a city shaped by waves of immigration.

By marking today as the “birthday” of Boston, we choose to start the city’s story from [the perspective of the English Puritan emigrants](#). Of course, when the Puritans first arrived in 1630, the peninsula of land, which the English named “Boston,” was already the home of the Massachusett people. For centuries the Massachusett had fished the waters, tended the forests, hunted game, and nurtured plants upon and around the peninsula. Following patterns of seasonal migration, the Massachusett moved between the coastline and the harbor islands in the summer to inland areas in the winter. To describe the peninsula as empty wilderness save the single English occupant, William Blackstone, is to elide the relationship of the Massachusett to the land and the water.

But for the Puritan leaders, Governor John Winthrop and Isaac Johnson, the peninsula fell within the bounds granted by the King of England in the charter for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Having already left Salem for Charlestown, Winthrop’s group was in search of arable land with a freshwater spring. When Johnson’s one-time college friend William Blackstone invited them to this peninsula, they came, naming the place Boston. It is this naming of Boston that we celebrate in today’s Charter Day service.

Over the summer, as I considered how I might approach this year’s Charter Day service, headlines of I.C.E. activity punctuated the news. Already in the spring, I had been in quiet conversation with several congregants whose lives had been upended by the rapidly changing immigration system and threats of deportation. Then in July, I learned that a young man I know was picked up and sent to “Alligator Alcatraz.” Suddenly the headlines were a name and a face, a man whose smile and laugh I know, whose hard work helped to renovate the house where I securely and comfortably sleep each night.

The push against immigrants continues with the federal government filing suit against Boston this week for its “sanctuary” practices. ([Boston Globe, September 5, 2025](#)) As these events unfold, the words of [poet Warshan Shire](#) move like an ancient Greek chorus through my thoughts.

*No one no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark.*

Did this fear also hold true for the 17th century Puritan emigrants . . . for the ancestors who founded this church and this city 395 years ago? In the decades surrounding the Puritan’s emigration, England had been rife with political strife emerging from religious difference. When Charles I became king in 1625, he began to move against the reforms envisioned by the Puritans. Then, in the 1630’s Charles removed Puritan clergy from the Church of England. When some Puritans spoke out and wrote criticisms of Charles for his actions, they were imprisoned for sedition. One critic had his ears cut off. Another critic was flogged, dragged behind an oxcart, and made to stoop in a pillory.

*no one leaves home unless home chases you,
fire under feet,
hot blood in your belly.*

In Boston England, namesake to our city, the Rev. John Cotton preached at the St. Botolph church drawing crowds from surrounding towns, including another one-day emigrant, [Anne Hutchinson](#). While Cotton initially enjoyed some degree of protection from the Earl of Lincoln, he too became a target of the crown. After hiding out for a year in England, Cotton fled to our Boston in 1633 with his pregnant wife, Sarah. On the ship, Sarah gave birth to a son, they aptly named Seaborne. Shortly after their arrival, John and Sarah Cotton were admitted to membership here at First Church and Seaborne was baptized.

*no one would put their children in a boat
unless the sea is safer than the land*

The stories I grew up hearing about the Puritans emphasized their religious piety and devotion. Depending on the teller’s point of view, Puritans were caricatures either derided as joyless religious zealots who hated Christmas OR lauded as bold and faithful Christians willing to risk everything for their faith. In neither account were they vulnerable people fleeing violence, economic downturn, and a bleak future for themselves and their children. And yet, whole family groups and neighbors emigrated together from Boston, England.

*you only run for the border
when you see the whole city
running as well.*

Since becoming minister here two years ago, learning more about the Puritans has undermined simple caricatures of these founders. In my first [Charter Day sermon](#) here two years ago, I talked about the Puritan violence in the Pequot War and Governor John Winthrop's role in establishing the enslavement of Indigenous and African peoples in Boston and New England. Then last year, I explored the [proto-democratic practices](#) within the governance of the church and colony. Both are true: the violence of English settlers upon the indigenous peoples of this land *and* the roots of an expanding freedom and democracy.

The Puritan story is not simple. Their legacy—our legacy as the First Church in Boston and as Boston residents—is riddled with complex questions of faith, freedom, and injustice. Ours is a story both of searching for sanctuary from religious persecution *and* of the active oppression of racial, cultural, and religious difference. For example, although Anne Hutchison followed her pastor, John Cotton, across the ocean in 1634, she was later tried for heresy and exiled by colonial and church leaders. In searching for sanctuary for *their* beliefs, too many Puritan leaders had little tolerance for *other* beliefs.

Over time, the Puritan grasp on the culture and government of Boston and Massachusetts Bay weakened. Just consider that today our basketball team is the Boston *Celtics*! Since the 19th century, Irish immigrants have made up the largest ethnic group in the region according to the Boston College website, "[Global Boston.](#)" Furthermore, the labor of Irish immigrants quite literally built Boston via the massive landfill projects of South Cove and Back Bay. And by the 20th century, the Irish community held significant power in business and government—including our famous president, John F. Kennedy. The massive Cathedral of the Holy Cross on Washington Street testifies to the enormous presence of Irish Catholic immigrants in the nineteenth century when it was first built. Today, the Cathedral includes large English and Spanish-speaking congregations as it continues to incorporate immigrants from around the globe.

Indeed, although restrictive immigration policies in the early 20th century lowered the numbers of foreign-born people in Boston for decades, the 1965 Immigration Act began to reopen the city for immigrants. The statistics tell a clear story with a steady climb in the percentage of [foreign-born residents](#) from the 1970's onward. And, since 2000, Boston has been a [majority-nonwhite city](#)—even if the Boston Metro area and Massachusetts remain predominantly white. These many new global immigrants are from Haiti, Mexico, China, India, Brazil, Syria, Afghanistan, Europe, and many, many more places. They are immigrants who are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian. They are immigrants who worship one God, many gods, or no God. And they are immigrants who have constructed new houses of worship, such as the [Islamic Cultural Center in Roxbury](#), publicly dedicated in

2009. That slender minaret rising between the Puritan founded First Church in Roxbury and the Cathedral of the Holy Cross reminds us that today Boston is a city shaped by waves of immigration.

When I migrated to the Boston area in 2003 for grad school, I arrived as a single parent with a five-year-old “[duckling](#).” As I struggled to manage school, parenting, and part-time work, my neighbor Hoda befriended me. Mother to two little ones, she generously welcomed us into their home for playtime, watched my son as I ran to the store, and even left hot meals for me to find at my doorstep at the end of a long day. She also answered my questions about her Muslim faith and introduced me to her nearby mosque where she taught classes to adults. In a strange new place, she welcomed and cared for me and my child.

While the history of the First Church in Boston makes clear the times we have failed to welcome strangers, the story continues today. Today people will be arrested. Today thousands sit in detention. Today parents, friends, coworkers are scared for those who have been taken. I am a minister, not an immigration attorney or a policy wonk. My message today is not a six-point plan for immigration reform. My message today is a reminder of the long history of *people* searching for sanctuary from fear and violence, hoping for a better life for themselves and their families. My *religious* commitments call me to do what I am able to support *people* in their search for life-giving sustenance and safety. My religious values call me to center *love*, to recognize the *worthiness* of each person, and thus to welcome the stranger with respect and dignity.

Boston may have begun as an effort to create a purer, more perfect Christian society, but after nearly four hundred years we are a diverse, majority-minority, global city. So also, First Church may have been founded by Puritan Christians, but today we intentionally embrace religious difference, recognizing the many ways people find meaning, hope, and spiritual guidance in life. Both church and city have changed over the centuries—and much of that change has been fueled by waves of immigration.

As people continue to search for places of sanctuary, may we each do what we are able to extend a generous welcome to a stranger, remembering the shark they may be fleeing and the vulnerabilities that connect us all. Perhaps what has *not* changed in 395 years is this recognition that gathering together in community makes us all safer and stronger.

So may it be. Amen.