

## Message for Sunday October 8, 2023

### Part I Mia Noren, Director of Religious Education

Genealogical research is one of my hobbies. I often talk about the Jewish side of my family because I was raised to identify that way. But something else I discovered, on my mother's side, is that I'm a Mayflower descendant- My 12<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather is William Brewster, the spiritual leader of the group that became known as the Pilgrims. It's not that special- even though only 5 women survived that first year at Plymouth, there are today an estimated 35 million Mayflower descendants around the world.

The Elder William Brewster was a faith leader, and an influential figure, and consequently, his family members and descendants were, too. His great-granddaughter, Elizabeth, married into the Gedney family, whose patriarch, John, was one of the town of Salem's founders and leading citizens. John's son Eleazer- Elizabeth's husband- is my direct ancestor. Eleazer was a shipwright, and helped his brother Bartholomew start his professional life as a ship's carpenter. Later records show he was known as a physician. Then, as influential white men did, he entered public service as a town selectman. He was a member of the local militia and rose to the rank of colonel by the end of King Philip's War in 1676. That was a war between northern New England colonists and Metacom, a leader of the Wampanoag people, otherwise known as King Philip, and several other tribes. After the war, Bartholomew was awarded a great deal of Abenaki land in Maine as the result of successful military expeditions to re-establish colonial occupation there.

A very full resume, but notice- no training in law. In those days, appointments to positions in the various courts were awarded to influential, rich merchants and successful military men. Only three of the nine Salem Witch Trial judges had a degree, from Harvard, which at that time was training only Puritan clergy. There were no lawyers as we know them in Massachusetts in 1692. How did Bartholomew Gedney come to be a judge during the Salem Witch Trials?

Imagine yourself as the respected and upstanding citizen of a growing village, known throughout the Province of Massachusetts Bay, trusted by the King's representatives in government to act in the best interest of the laws of the time. You're handling criminal cases and probate and wills and then are appointed to a special court established to address the mayhem and hysteria brewing in your town, among people you know, of witchcraft.

The King's representative Sir William Phips, the new Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, appointed Gedney as a magistrate and the first probate judge in Salem and Essex County. Gedney served on several courts and councils there, gaining experience in the English Common law of that time. In 1692, Governor Phips established a court of Oyer and Terminer, which is a special court authorized to hear (Oyer) and to determine (Terminer) certain cases, in this case specifically to clear the growing backlog of accusations and arrests for witchcraft, which was approaching crisis proportions.

The first legal code in New England, called the Body of Liberties, included witchcraft among its capital offenses, citing Biblical sources for its authority. Defense lawyers and cross examination did not yet exist.

Most, but not all, Puritans in the 1690's believed that physical realities had spiritual causes. For example, if the crops failed, the Devil may have been responsible. If you fell sick, the cause may have been the curse of a witch. It was not a stretch for people to accept 'spectral evidence'- testimony in which witnesses claimed that the accused appeared to them and did them lasting harm in a dream or vision. That type of evidence was allowed by William Stoughton, the man in charge of the special court. That was the primary evidence used as proof of guilt during the Salem Witch Trials. All the judges of that court appeared to believe it.

At that time, the law assumed that the accused were guilty. The idea that one is innocent until proven guilty didn't appear until a supreme court decision in 1895 established that as a requirement for a fair trial.

There was much controversy over the events as they were happening, and much alarm at how fast the accusations were spreading. Finally, almost six months after the trials had started, Harvard President Increase Mather spoke against spectral evidence, stating that *"It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned."* In response, his political partner Governor Phips declared that the Court he had established must be dismissed. His change of attitude may have been aided by the fact that his own wife was being questioned for witchcraft. Out of 200 accused of witchcraft, twenty people convicted by the court were executed before the court was disbanded.

A new court was formed with instructions to entirely disregard spectral evidence. The Superior Court of Judicature resolved most accusations of witchcraft with acquittals.

Bartholomew Gedney continued serving on courts and in councils, even participating in one last military exercise in 1696, before dying in 1698 at the age of 57.

## **Part II: The Salem Witch Trials**

### **The Rev. Angela Herrera**

Most people say the trouble began in the darkest, coldest days that winter. It was January 1692, in what is called Salem, Massachusetts. It was, in fact, the homeland of the Pawtucket band of the Massachusett people. The Massachusett people, who continue to exist today. Against all odds their ancestors survived those years, and protected elements of their culture and tradition that are thousands of years old. That is the land where this story about colonists takes place.

In 1692, it had not been long since the invasion of that land began—there were still people alive who remembered the before time. So, people lived in a time of fear, tension, and violence. It was not safe for anyone.

Hunger was a looming threat each winter for the colonists, along with the challenge of trying to stay safe from the brutal cold. Illness took many lives. There were frequent border and boundary disputes. All of this created a climate of fear and anxiety. To make matters worse, factions were forming in the village of Salem, and inflation was putting pressure on everyone.

Finally, the colonists had brought with them from England a culture shaped by trauma and fear. It was a culture that had just come through the medieval era.

In that era in Europe, which lasted from 500 to about 1500 C.E., extreme violence was commonplace, especially against those whom the Catholic Church called heretics. Those included people who denied the trinity, Jewish people, and people accused of witchcraft. In Europe, over a period of three hundred years, as many as 50,000 people were executed for witchcraft.

This was the cultural context, the backdrop, when nine-year-old Betty Parris and eleven-year-old Abigail Williams, the children of colonists, suddenly fell ill... and not from the smallpox that had sickened or killed so many others. The girls' symptoms were strange: they made weird sounds and hid under the furniture. They clutched their heads. So, when neither prayer nor medicine seemed to help, their parents assumed it must be witchcraft at work.

As word got out about the girls' mysterious illness, others also began to fall ill with strange symptoms. They complained of disembodied spirits attacking them, and soon they began to call out names, saying the specters belonged to some of their neighbors, and sometimes to acquaintances or total strangers. Anyone could be accused of witchcraft, but women who talked back to their husbands in public, or who were widowed and lived alone, or who worked as healers or midwives, were especially targeted.

With the accusations mounting, a newly appointed governor created the court Mia told you about, the court of Oyer and Terminer. On June 10, Bridget Bishop was the first person found guilty and hanged. Eighteen others followed her to the gallows over the next three days. The accused and their families and ministers petitioned and wrote letters to the Governor imploring him to stop. Finally, when the governor's own wife was accused of witchcraft as well, he disbanded the court.

Over the course of that year, as many as 200 people were jailed for witchcraft. The second court that was formed acquitted most of them. When a few convictions remained, the governor let them go.

The witch trials had come and gone in a year, but they had a lasting impact.

In 1697, the Massachusetts General Court ordered a day of fasting and prayer in atonement for errors made by the colony, including the witchcraft trials. One judge and twelve jurors publicly apologized that day for their role. But according to the Salem Witch Museum, "the other magistrates never admitted there had been a miscarriage of justice, going to their graves believing they did what was best for the colony."

Has anyone here ever been to the Salem Witch Museum? It's in Salem. I've visited a couple of times. It's in a gothic building from the 1840's that was originally the home of Second Unitarian Church. (There are some "Second" churches. Hard to fathom out here in the West where any Unitarian church is often both the first and last one for hundreds of miles.)

The museum has two kinds of exhibits. The first exhibit is all about the history of the Salem witch trials. The second is about the evolving perception of witches. Cultures all over the world have practiced magic throughout human history. There are also modern day self-identified pagan witches who practice an earth-based spirituality here in the US. Unitarian Universalism includes many UUs who identify this way.

The persecution of witches, and the accusation that they harm children, cause illness, and conspire with the devil to harm society, came from the medieval Catholic Church. Most people know about that. What most people probably don't know about, however, is the strong connection between the persecution of witches and the persecution of Jews.

I first learned about this in a class on Judaism. A few months ago, a lecture at the Salem Witch Museum also described the relationship, evidence of which can in fact be found right before our eyes today.<sup>i</sup>

The museum's Directors of Education Rachel Christ-Doane and Jill Christianson described how "before witchcraft became a dominant scapegoat for misfortune in Europe, it was Jews who were often said to be demonic, evil individuals who poisoned wells, spread plague, and harmed children."

In antisemitic propaganda, Jews were portrayed with exaggerated facial features, meant to make them look scary, including very large noses, and women with large hairy chins. They were accused of poisoning wells, spreading plague, and eating children—which, in case any children are paying attention, is not true. No one does that! But it's very similar to what people would later say about witches, for example in the story of Hansel and Gretel. Jews were also accused of ruining society by inter-marrying. In the thirteenth century, Catholic authorities required Jewish people to wear distinctive pointy hats so they would be easily identifiable. Antisemitic propaganda and art from that era also portray those pointy hats, with some of them very closely resembling what we think of today as a witch hat.

In other words, today's stereotypical idea of witches, the Halloween costume kind, comes from the medieval era, and appears to have evolved from the antisemitic tropes of the time.

Jews and alleged witches were both depicted with big noses and pointy hats, and both were accused of conspiring against Christians, of causing or spreading disease, and of harming children. Both were persecuted for it.

Both were the targets of witch hunts. The Witch Museum says witch hunts occur when there is a climate of fear, and something happens to escalate it, triggering people to find a scapegoat.

Escalated fear and anger over loss of WWI led to Jews being scapegoated as the reason for Germany's troubles, and six million were murdered. The attack on Pearl Harbor escalated white Americans fears in WWII, and Japanese Americans were scapegoated, and locked up in internment camps. (Including my uncle, who was just eight years old.) Today, some religious and political conservatives—not all but some—are again afraid of diversity in our society, are afraid evil forces are conspiring against Christianity's stronghold, and they are scapegoating trans people. They do this by saying, guess what, that these new scapegoats go against God, have a conspiracy to take over the culture (a gay agenda), and want to harm children. That's a pretty familiar set of accusations, right? It's a classic witch hunt.

When I hear a politician complain that *they* are the target of a witch hunt, this is the meaning of that term. The ones who say it are often the same ones who are promoting today's witch hunts, making their complaints either incredibly ignorant or gaslighting, and patently false.

We are also again seeing a rise in antisemitism. We all heard the white supremacist rallying cry in Charlottesville in 2017, “Jews will not replace us.” That paranoia harkens back to the medieval accusation about Jews intermarrying, and the anti-Jewish (and anti-witch, and anti-gray and anti-trans) accusations of being part of some big conspiracy. Those antisemitic conspiracy accusations today include controlling congress and the media and Wallstreet. The money-related antisemitic stereotypes are deeply ironic, by the way. In the medieval era, the authorities limited what kinds of work Jews were allowed to do. They were limited in part to professions that the ruling classes disdained, such as tax collectors, money lenders, and other money management related jobs. That’s where that stereotype comes from—it’s antisemitism doubling down on itself.

A year after Charlottesville, the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh was attacked. And over the last few years, other antisemitic incidents have sharply risen. In 2022, the antidefamation league recorded 3,697 antisemitic incidents. It was the highest number ever recorded in their almost forty-five years of keeping track, was the third time in four years to break a record, and reflects the overall upward trend since 2013, when there were 751 incidents. The incidents include assault, harassment, and explicitly antisemitic vandalism.

Sometimes, antisemitism hides in plain sight. This year a Harry Potter video game, “Hogwarts Legacy” was released featuring goblins who are hook nosed creatures that are obsessed with money. One of them has a shofar—a traditional Jewish horn sounded in the high holy days—and they are looking for children.

Earlier, I shared a prayer from Starhawk with you. Starhawk is from a Jewish family. She was raised Jewish, went to Hebrew school and to The University of Judaism (which is now American Jewish University). She still identifies as Jewish, and she also identifies—and is widely respected as— as a modern-day witch. One way to define a witch is: someone who works “with elements of the natural world, including our human nature to generate more possibilities.” They do this with ritual and magic –which is probably different from what you imagine. I’ll talk more about that next Sunday. That’s the kind of witch Starhawk is.

She has a lot to say about living in these times, where we have so much fear and uncertainty.<sup>ii</sup>

One thing she points out is that we can’t change a system if we keep thinking in the same way the system thinks. Last Sunday I preached about generational trauma. I talked about the way unhealed trauma is handed down from one generation to the next, often without anyone realizing it. So much of what looks like culture in the US is a legacy of violence and unhealed trauma that have become almost self-perpetuating. One of our most important tasks in this time is learning about that, learning to see it in ourselves and others and in our culture. And addressing and healing it wherever we can.

Another important mission is to embody what we want to see. When we are faced with unjust systems and events, we have to say no sometimes. We do have to say no to celebrating brutal colonizers with statues of men like Juan de Oñate. We have to say no to romanticizing this country’s horrific history. Another way we say no to that is by acknowledging the atrocities that were taking place whenever we speak of that time. It is weird to gloss over that level of violence. It normalizes it. We say have to say no to that. And no to antisemitism. And no to

other scapegoating and oppression. We have to say no sometimes but, Starhawk points out, our movements are strongest when they embody a yes.

We say yes to embracing each other's complexity, yes to diversity, yes to freeing ourselves from the structures of oppression within. Yes, to caring community. Yes, to right relationship, and to the valuable hard work that entails. Yes, to healing. Yes, to our relationship with this earth.

Yes, to speaking the truth.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://salemwitchmuseum.com/videos/witch-trials-and-antisemitism-a-surprisingly-tangled-history/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.endoftheworldshow.org/blog/2023/8/21/witch-school-chapter-8-starhawk>