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First Voyage to the Americas: Columbus Guided by the Spirit

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CHAPTER FIVE

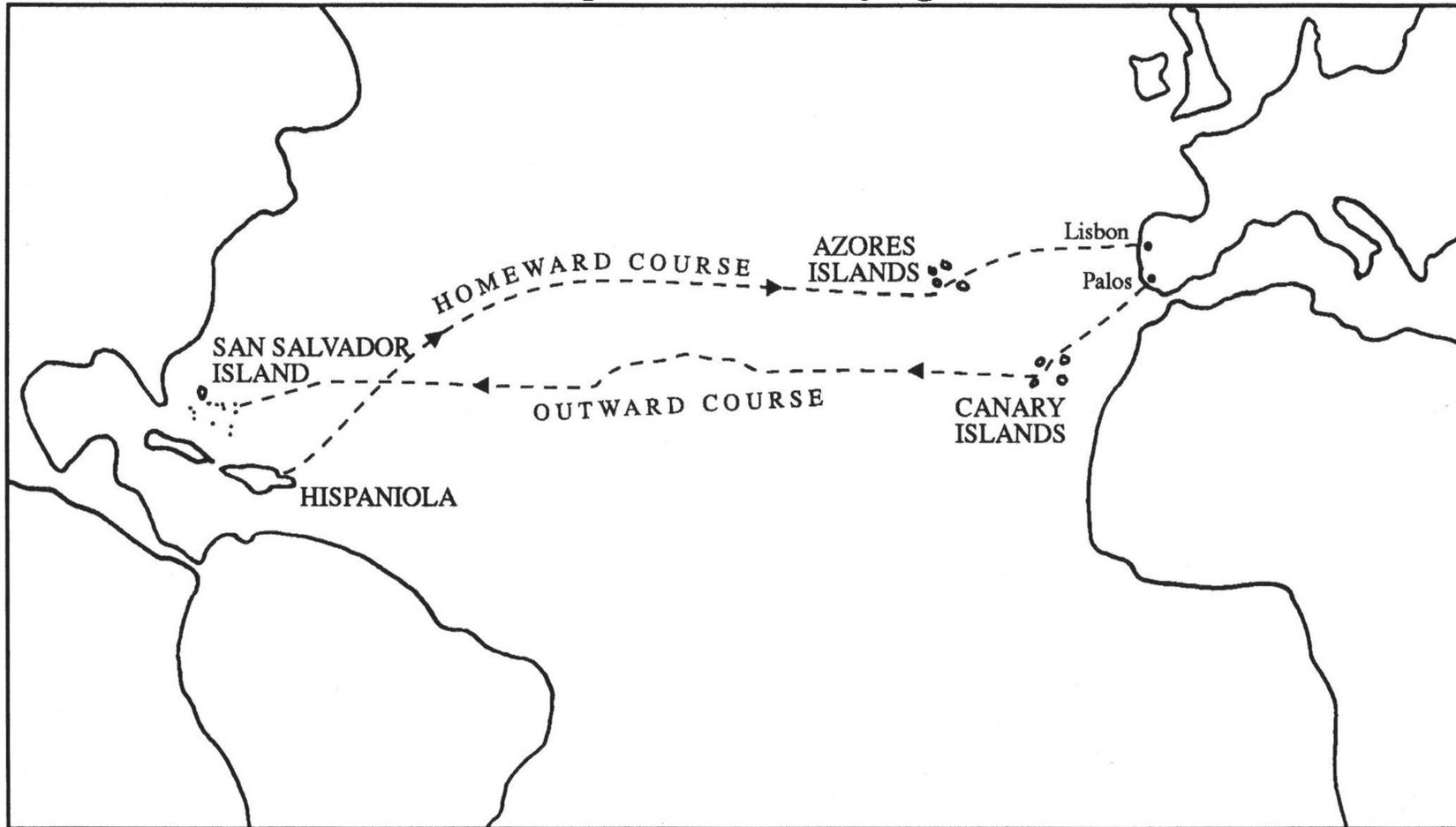
First Voyage to the Americas: Columbus Guided by the Spirit

With a hand that could be felt, the Lord opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies. . . . This was a fire that burned within me. . . . who can doubt that this fire was not merely mine, but also of the Holy Spirit.

—Christopher Columbus

The anticipation and drama associated with Christopher Columbus' first expedition to the Americas is almost unparalleled in human history. Perhaps the only event of comparable magnitude in our day was man's first landing on the moon in 1969. Inasmuch as Columbus sailed 33 continuous days into the unknown, with a crew on the verge of mutiny in the final stages, it is apparent that every decision he made was crucial to both the success of his expedition and the survival of his small fleet. It is amazing, said George E. Nunn, a prominent geographer, that Christopher "did not make a single false move in the entire voyage" (Nunn 43). To what can we attribute such incredible seafaring precision, and what were the Admiral's inner-most thoughts and feelings during the voyage? The answers to these questions lie in the several accounts of the journey that have endured the five centuries since that stunning expedition.

Map of First Voyage



Historians have written about Columbus' first voyage to America from many points of view. Most secular historians, however, have placed little emphasis on the most important theme of all—the fact that Columbus was guided by the Spirit of God. Beginning with the decision Christopher made concerning his point of departure, and continuing all the way through to his return voyage to Spain, we can find numerous junctures at which the Lord manifested His hand in Columbus' key decisions.

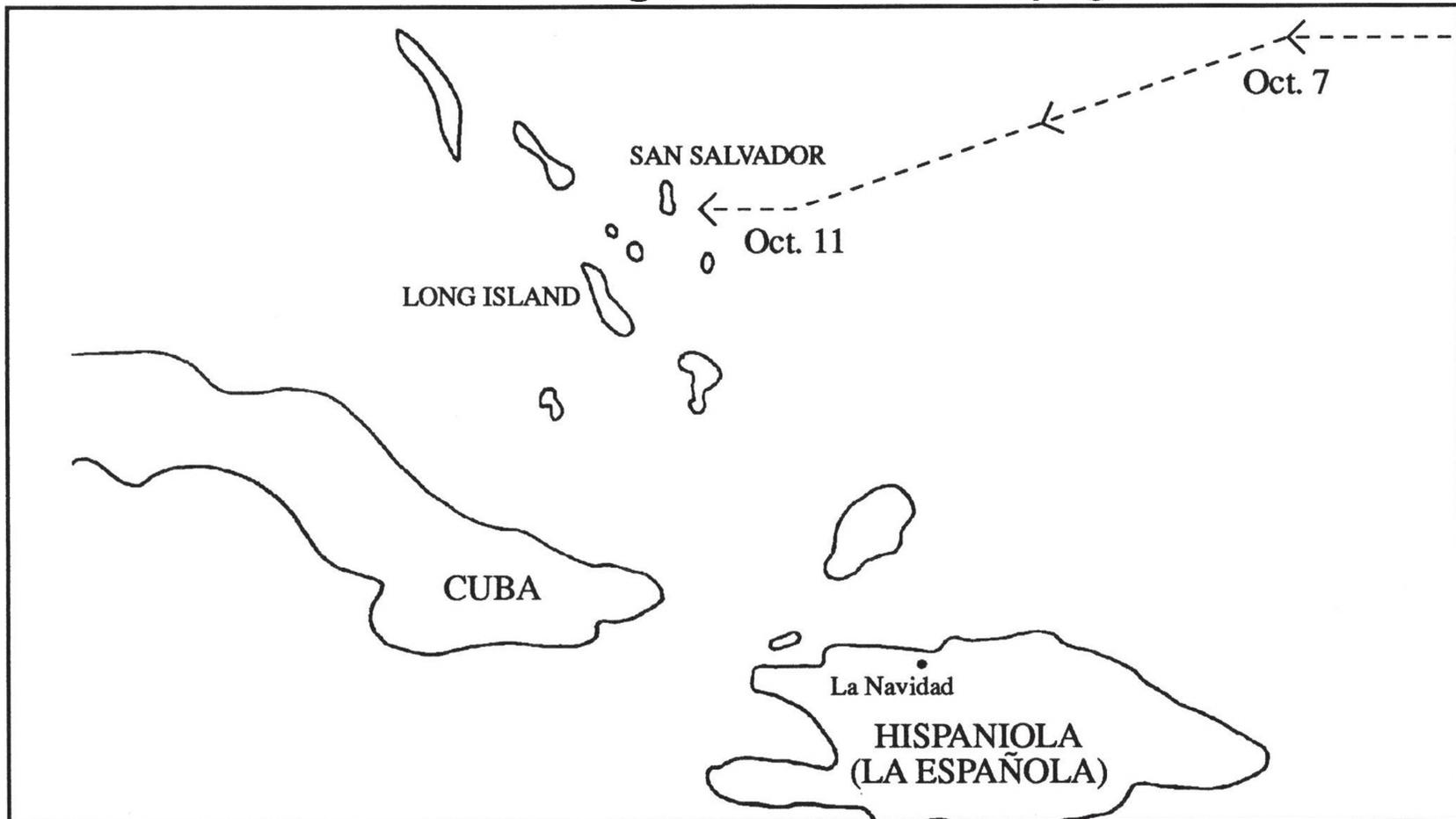
Before 1492, other navigators had tried unsuccessfully to explore westward from the Azores Islands (800 miles west of the coast of Portugal), assuming that this was the best place from which to set sail (Morison 1:97–98). Although the Azores were the western-most islands known in the Atlantic, Columbus chose to sail from Palos, Spain, to the Canary Islands (off the west coast of Africa) and from there, to launch his voyage into the vast unknown. By doing so, he caught the tradewinds blowing from the northeast to the southwest and avoided the headwinds which blow from the west to the east in the vicinity of the Azores (Nunn 37–38, 42).

The route Columbus chose has stood the test of time: five hundred years of sailing have proven it the best possible course for sailing west from southern Europe to North America. Nunn suggested that Columbus' successful navigation was the result of “an application of reason to . . . knowledge” (Nunn 50). Columbus, however, gave credit to the Lord. Even though he was a successful seaman and an accomplished navigator, he said, “With a hand that could be felt, the Lord opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies” (West and Kling 105).

Inspirational Junctures

Columbus experienced relatively easy sailing during the entire outward voyage; had he not done so, he likely would not have reached America before his crew mutinied. There was one occasion, however, on 23 September, when the sea became

Course Changes of the First Voyage



calm, and the ships were stalled for part of the day. Columbus noted in his journal that the crew, which had not seen land for some days, began to complain that since there were no heavy seas in the region, the wind would never blow hard enough to return to Spain. Soon thereafter, the sea mysteriously rose without wind, astonishing the crew (Dunn and Kelly 41). The Admiral considered this a divine miracle. He said, “the high sea was very necessary to me, [a sign] which had not appeared except in the time of the Jews when they left Egypt [and complained] against Moses, who took them out of captivity” (Ibid).

On the way to America, Columbus changed course only twice during the entire 33 days at sea. The first alteration was on 7 October. Until that time, Christopher had sailed due west for 28 days. Then he noted in his journal that a great multitude of birds passed over, going from north to southwest. Bartolomé de Las Casas, the man who transcribed Columbus’ journal, wrote that from this observation, the Admiral “decided to alter course and turn the prow to the WSW [west southwest]” (Fuson 71). Professor Morison claimed that if Columbus had not changed course, “the voyage would have taken a day longer” (Morison 1:283). That extra day would have been critical, since two days before the eventual sighting of land, the crew threatened mutiny. Every extra day at sea heightened their anxiety; the Admiral’s time-saving change of course on 7 October, therefore, just may have saved the expedition.

The story of the threatened mutiny is one of the most dramatic episodes of the first voyage. The incident took place on Wednesday, 10 October 1492, after they had been at sea for over 31 days without seeing land. The sailors, who had been concealing their discontent, now openly threatened insurrection. They had come to believe that Columbus, the foreigner from Genoa, had deceived them; they supposed he was leading them on a journey from which they would never return. According to one account, the sailors even conspired to do away with their leader, whom they “planned to throw into the sea” (d’-

Anghera 1:59–60). Yet, “Columbus, by using gentle words, holding out promises and flattering their hopes, sought to gain time, and he succeeded in calming their fears” (Ibid). Others have stated, after the fact, that at this juncture, Columbus promised the men that they would return if they did not sight land within two or three days (Morison 1:286, 290–91, 292n6). Although Columbus did not record this oft-repeated assertion in his journal, he did report that “I also told the men that it was useless to complain, for I had started out to find the Indies and would continue until I had accomplished that mission, *with the help of Our Lord*” (Fuson 72; emphasis added). This incident serves as an excellent example of Columbus’ determination and faith in God.

The second instance in which the Admiral altered his route was after sunset on 11 October, just a few hours before land was sighted. For no apparent reason, he gave orders to change direction from west southwest back to the original course of due west (Dunn and Kelly 59). He gave no explanation for the change, but it was, nevertheless, an excellent choice. Had he continued on the west southwest course instead of steering due west, he would have missed the island of San Salvador, and would likely have ended up on the deadly reefs along the coast of Long Island (in the Caribbean), perhaps never returning to Spain (Morison 1:295). Many historians have attributed these changes in course to luck or chance, but Las Casas said, “God gave this man the keys to the awesome seas, he and no other unlocked the darkness” (Las Casas 35), and I agree.

Having made this second course correction, Columbus was then right on target, and just in time to meet with his destiny—to discover the New Land. That evening as the crew gathered for prayer, the Admiral, “spoke to the men of the favor that [the] Lord had shown them by conducting them so safely and prosperously with fair winds and a clear course, and by comforting them with signs that daily grew more abundant” (Ferdinand 58). His policy since reaching a point 700 leagues beyond the Canaries had been not to sail at night, but the crew’s

desire to see land was so great that Columbus decided to sail through the darkness (Morison 1:294). He commanded the night watch to keep an especially sharp lookout because he was confident that land was nearby. In addition to an annuity of 10,000 maravedis guaranteed by the Sovereigns, the Admiral also promised to give a silk jacket to the first sailor who sighted land (Dunn and Kelly 63).

About 10 o'clock that night, Columbus saw a light in the distant dark, but it was so faint that he did not publicly announce it. He did, however, bring it to the attention of Pedro Gutiérrez, who also acknowledged seeing the flickering light. Rodrigo Sánchez was also called on to observe the light, but he claimed he could see nothing from where he was (Phillips and Phillips 153). Notwithstanding Columbus' glimpse of the light, it was some four hours later, at about two in the morning on 12 October, that the fleet sighted land for certain. Rodrigo de Triana, a sailor on the *Pinta*, shouted, "*Tierra! tierra!*", while the fleet was still two leagues off shore (Morison 1:298). Martín Pinzón, the captain of the *Pinta*, quickly verified Triana's claim and then fired a cannon shot, which was the prearranged signal for sighting land.

One can only imagine the gratitude and relief they all must have felt, after more than a month of anxious days at sea, when their eyes first saw this obscure little island in the middle of the tropical Caribbean Sea. It goes without saying that the crews were ecstatic and their respect and admiration for the Admiral soared, literally, overnight.

For Columbus, this historic sighting was a rendezvous with destiny. He had proven, in spite of mounting opposition and a lack of faith on the part of his crew, that it was possible to sail westward across the great Atlantic. According to his agreement with the monarchs, Columbus officially became Admiral of the Ocean Sea, simultaneously gaining the titles of Viceroy and Governor of this island at the moment he discovered it. Professor Hugh Nibley aptly put this celebrated moment into proper perspective when he said: "Everything else in Columbus' life

is subservient to the carrying out of that one mission. The aim and purpose of all his work and suffering was what happened at 2 a.m. on the morning of October 12, 1492” (Nibley 320).

Impatient and anxious to explore their new discovery, the crew waited through the night, and sailed excitedly to shore at daybreak. Upon reaching dry ground, the landing party knelt, kissed the sand with tears of joy, and offered prayers of thanks to God. Rising from his knees, the Admiral named the island San Salvador (Holy Savior), thus beginning a personal tradition of giving names of religious significance to many newly discovered lands (Ferdinand 59). In deference to the crown, Columbus dedicated San Salvador, which lay off the northern coast of Cuba, to the Spanish monarchs.

Exploring the Wonders of the Caribbean

The arrival of the ships did not go unnoticed by the inhabitants of the island. Many of the natives soon gathered at the crew’s landing site. Columbus observed that, “All of them go around as naked as their mothers bore them; and the women also, although I did not see more than one quite young girl. And all those that I saw were young people, for none did I see of more than 30 years of age. They are very well formed, with handsome bodies and good faces. Their hair [is] coarse—almost like the tail of a horse—and short” (Dunn and Kelly 65–66).

The Admiral’s faithful motive for making the voyage is quickly revealed by his impressions on meeting the island people. He confided, “I recognized that they were people who would be better freed [from error] and converted to our Holy Faith by love than by force” (Ibid 65). Later in his journal, Columbus noted: “I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion” (Ibid 69). He determined to take six of the islanders with him in order to educate them in Spanish and in the ways of European life.

After three days of exploring on San Salvador, the Admiral set sail southward, passing various islands en route to an even-

tual landing at Cuba on 28 October. An astonishing reception awaited the Spanish explorers at this port. Columbus sent two men inland to survey the island's interior, and they returned with an inspirational account. Arriving at a village of about 1000 inhabitants 12 leagues from the shore, the men had been greeted with great reverence and adoration: "the Indians touched them and kissed their hands and feet, marveling and believing that the Spaniards came from the heavens" (Dunn and Kelly 137).

Through an Indian interpreter, the village was informed "of the way the Christians lived and that they were good people." Later, the women of the village came toward the two explorers, "kissing their hands and feet and feeling them, attempting to see if they were, like themselves, of flesh and bone" (Ibid). When it came time for the two Spaniards to leave, hundreds of the natives wanted to go with them. Columbus wrote that, "more than 500 men and women would have come with them, because they thought that the Spaniards would return to the heavens" (Ibid).

This account of native Americans giving reverence to the fair-skinned men whom they believed had come from heaven is intriguing to those who believe in the Book of Mormon. The Indians' adoration for these men undoubtedly came from their belief in the legend of the bearded white God. Of course many Latter-day Saints believe that this legend is based on the Book of Mormon account in 3 Nephi of Christ's appearance in ancient America after his resurrection.

Paul Cheesman in *The World of the Book of Mormon* claimed: "The bearded white God is one of the most universally taught and accepted legends of the Indians of North and South America. Virtually all tribes teach of him. Tribal songs, dances, and sacred rituals are dedicated to his name" (Cheesman 7). Even though the white God's "name varies from tribe to tribe, his description and teachings are basically the same. In each tribe, in song and story, he was described as white and fair, with long brown hair and a beard"(Ibid). Cheesman further stated

that the God's "message was of love and peace. He announced to the people that he was born of a virgin. And, last of all, He promised to return" (Ibid). Because this legend was part of their culture, it is little wonder that the native Americans of Cuba sincerely believed that Columbus' fair-skinned sailors literally came from heaven and were, therefore, worthy of reverence and adoration.

Christopher was so impressed with the spiritual potential of the Indians that he made an immediate plea on their behalf in his journal that day: "I truly believe, most Serene Princes . . . that, given devout religious persons knowing thoroughly the language that they use, soon all of them would become Christian." Continuing his petition to the monarchs, he pleaded, "I hope in Our Lord that Your Highnesses, with much diligence, will decide to send such persons in order to bring to the Church such great nations and to convert them" (Dunn and Kelley 141). These requests, made at a time of such personal accomplishment, further illuminate Christopher's great devotion to things spiritual; the informed reader can not doubt that he was truly motivated by his desire to serve God.

Unfortunately, not all of the crew's discoveries on Cuba were of a spiritual nature: it was there that the Admiral's men first saw the Indians smoke tobacco, an experience that eventually led to its introduction to Europe and the rest of the world. Written forty years after the fact, Las Casas' account of the sailors' experience with tobacco is humorous: he wrote that the Spaniards were then beginning to take up smoking, "although I know not what taste or profit they find in it" (Morison 1:342).

Columbus spent the entire month of November exploring the northeast coast of Cuba; then, on 5 December 1492, he sailed across the windward passage and safely made his way to the island of Hispaniola. The climate and trees of this new land reminded him so much of Spain that he decided to name it *Española* (Dunn and Kelly 215). However, as early as 1494, Peter Martyr, the first New World historian, began referring to the island as *Hispaniola*, its Latin name, by which it is still

known today (Morison 1:370, 383n5). Haiti and the Dominican Republic are the two countries currently on the island. This island would soon become the home of the first Spanish colony in the New World. Unfortunately, it would also be the scene of much frustration, tribulation, and humiliation for Columbus.

The Admiral's first Christmas in America was not destined to be a merry one. Instead, it was the date of a major calamity on this historic voyage. On the days just prior to Christmas, while the fleet was exploring the shores of Hispaniola, the weather had been turbulent making it difficult for the crew to sleep. Then on Christmas Eve the weather finally turned calm. After some Christmas festivities, the tired crew settled in for a restful night's sleep. Unfortunately, the helmsman was also sleepy and turned the tiller over to a boy, even though Columbus had specifically ordered the crew not to allow a boy to steer the ship (Dunn and Kelley 277).

Disaster struck just before midnight on Christmas Eve as the *Santa María* slid upon a coral reef so gently that the crew was not even aware that they were aground. Nevertheless, the boy knew what had happened as soon as he felt the rudder lodge in the coral (Taviani, *The Great Adventure*, 130–31). Even though it was not a tumultuous wreck and no lives were lost, the resulting leakage was so severe that the ship was unsalvageable. The accident forced Columbus to abandon the wreckage, and he was obliged to leave 39 of his crew in a make-shift fort built from what was left of the ship. This fort, named *La Navidad* because of their arrival on Christmas day, became the first Spanish colony in the New World, although it came about quite by chance. The crew members that were left behind to await the Admiral's return on his next voyage were more than willing to stay, because they would have the first chance at discovering gold, a dream which served to motivate many of the sailors (Morison 1: 393–94).

The Homeward Voyage

After exploring the islands of the Caribbean for three months, Columbus prepared to return to Europe in his substitute flagship, the *Niña*. The route the Admiral chose for his homeward journey is yet another example of his being inspired of God. On 14 January 1493, he recorded in his log, "I have faith in Our Lord that He who brought me here will lead me back in His pity and mercy . . . no one else was supportive of me except God, because He knew my heart" (Fuson 174). Columbus did not return to Spain by the same southern sea passage that had carried him to America. Instead, he sailed northeast and caught winds coming out of the west that took him back across the Atlantic to the Azores. Once again, Nunn asserted that Columbus' navigational decisions were remarkable: "So much has been said about his discovery of America that it has been lost to sight and thought that he also discovered both of the great sailing routes in the North Atlantic" (Nunn 50). With no prior trans-Atlantic sailing experience, how did Christopher enjoy such good fortune on both legs of the trip? One noted historian declared, "there can be no doubt that the faith of Columbus was genuine and sincere, and that his frequent communion with forces unseen was a vital element in his achievement" (Morison 1:65).

On 16 January the Admiral began his homeward trek. The unknown winds served him well at first; he experienced relatively smooth sailing for the first four weeks. Then, all of a sudden, it seemed as if the devil himself was attempting to prevent Columbus from achieving his providential destiny. On 12 February, the fleet was overtaken by a violent tempest, perhaps more perilous than any of the other storms the sailors had experienced in their lives. On 14 February, the winds became even more treacherous and Columbus' ship, the *Niña*, became separated from the *Pinta* until their journey's end. The Admiral said, "The winds increased and the waves were frightful, one contrary to the other, so they crossed and held back the

vessel which could neither go forward nor get out from between them, and the waves broke on her” (Dunn and Kelly 363–65). The storm was so terrible that none of the men thought they would live through it.

In the midst of this nightmare at sea, Columbus assembled the crew and called on the Lord for help. He ordered all the men on the ship to draw lots to choose one of the crew to take a pilgrimage to Santa María de Guadalupe if the Lord would save their lives and allow them to return to Spain. For the drawing, Christopher put a chick-pea into a hat for each member of the crew, with one pea marked with a cross. Columbus drew first and, as fate would have it, he picked the pea with the cross on it. When the storm raged on, Christopher ordered another drawing, this time for a pilgrimage to Santa María de Loreto in Italy. The lot fell on a sailor named Pedro de Villa, and Columbus promised to give him money for his journey. The storm intensified so the Admiral ordered a third drawing, this time for a pilgrimage to Santa Clara de Moguer. Surprisingly, the lot fell once again to him, but the storm did not subside. Finally, they all made a solemn covenant that if the Lord would lead them safely to shore, they would immediately “go in their shirt-sleeves in a procession to pray in a church” (Dunn and Kelly 365–67). That evening the storm began to subside and the next morning they spotted land—they had reached the Azores, 800 miles off the coast of Portugal.

However, the raging sea had not yet finished with the battered ships. After a week’s stay in the Azores, the *Niña* set sail for the mainland of Portugal. On 3 March another devastating storm struck, so powerfully that it tore all the ship’s sails. Once again the crew drew lots, this time to send a pilgrim in his shirt-sleeves to Santa María de la Cinta in Huelva. Amazingly the lot fell to Columbus again. In addition, all of the men “made a vow to fast on bread and water the first Saturday when they reached land” (Dunn and Kelley 391). The next morning the storm blew them into the mouth of the Lisbon River, and they made their way to a dock. Finally, they arrived at Palos, Spain,

on 15 March 1493; and the *Pinta* sailed into the same port just a few hours later. The next month Christopher Columbus appeared before King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain to give his report. “All the Court and the city came out to meet him; and the Catholic Sovereigns received him in public, seated with all majesty and grandeur on rich thrones under a canopy of cloth of gold. When he came forward to kiss their hands, they rose from their thrones as if he were a great lord, and would not let him kiss their hands but made him sit down beside them” (Ferdinand 101). This reception was a striking contrast from the scene played out the year before, when Columbus left the court in despair after these same monarchs had rejected his proposal.

Thus, with the help of the Lord, Christopher Columbus was able to accomplish one of the greatest feats in human history. After this marvelous achievement, he could have taken all the glory for himself, but throughout his life he consistently gave credit to God. For example, in 1500, he solemnly declared: “Our Lord made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth . . . and he showed me the place where to find it” (Brigham, *Life*, 50, 57n5).

The Admiral’s encounter with America literally opened the floodgate to explorers, colonizers, fortune seekers, and missionaries. Many of these people would accomplish honorable purposes, while others would, unfortunately, be detrimental. Whatever the final outcome, the world would most certainly never be the same.