

OUR THANKSGIVING DAY

The country has just celebrated the 400th anniversary of the first Thanksgiving. A dear friend belongs to a Presbyterian church in the Eastchester, New York. Nat delivered a sermon to his congregation on the Sunday before Thanksgiving this year focused on the myth versus the reality of the Thanksgiving celebration. The myth has to do with a group of religious pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock in December of 1620. They stayed onboard their ship until the Spring of 1621, then came ashore, met people they called Indians, built homes, and planted crops. In the Fall they celebrated, with their Indian friends, a feast they called Thanksgiving and America has been celebrating ever since.

The more complicated reality of Thanksgiving is quite another story. Nearly 50% of the passengers onboard the Mayflower perished during the Winter of 1620-21. Of the 19 women arriving in Cape Cod only 5 survived to come ashore. The Wampanoag people who were native to Cape Cod were suspicious of the English. A young native, who the English called Squanto, had encountered the English several years earlier. He had been captured by them, put in chains and taken to England as a slave. Squanto was sold to the Spanish who later set him free, put him on a ship and sent him back to America where he arrived a year before the Pilgrims.

No one knows exactly why the English-speaking Squanto, whose real name was Tisquantum, convinced his countrymen to help the Pilgrims. The Wampanoag taught the newcomers to hunt and fish, and to plant and fertilize native crops including corn. When Fall arrived the Wampanoag were not invited to the 3-day celebration of the harvest the Pilgrims planned.

The new settlers were shooting their muskets in the air and the Wampanoag arrived en masse fearing an attack was taking place. Finding it was a celebration, the Wampanoag went off and came back with several deer and joined in the festivities.

Thanksgiving did not become a national holiday until the Fall of 1863. Abraham Lincoln had petitioned Congress to establish the last Thursday of November as a annual national Thanksgiving Day. Until then, Thanksgiving was celebrated only regionally and sporadically. The country was now in the midst of Civil War and a New England publisher, Sarah Josepha Hale, was lobbying local and national politicians to establish the holiday. Lincoln became convinced the country would survive its greatest tragedy and that a national day of thanksgiving would be needed to heal and bind all of us together. What a compelling and real story about our national day of celebration.

A POSTLUDE - PANDEMIC BLESSINGS

If there is anything I have learned by being a member of the History Ministry at Plymouth is that history is messy, there is always more to learn and it is really important to separate myth from reality in telling our stories. This will be the last essay in this series of writings by members of our congregation to celebrate our Congregational heritage.

“How many of these essays do you think there will be?” asked Brett Younger. I told him I had no idea. It was Fall, 2020, and every church event including speakers, receptions, tours and dinners that our History Ministry had planned to observe the 400th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims in 1620 had been cancelled. There were no in-person worship services, Sunday School, or physical meetings of any kind taking place at Plymouth. The entire world was in lockdown.

It was Brett's suggestion that a way to celebrate was to have some of our members write essays about the legacy of the Pilgrims and what being a Congregationalist in 2020-21 means. We now have a year's worth of member writings by 28 women and 24 men, the youngest writer is in high school and the oldest just turned 97 years old. There are essays by longtime members and some by the newest to join Plymouth. A frequent comment when potential authors were approached was "I know little about being a Congregationalist." My response was, "Then write about what being a member of Plymouth Church means to you."

The outpouring of weekly writings in the Plymouth e-news has regularly brought me to tears. Each essay is a distinct and special piece of the Plymouth story, not the whole story by any means, there are hundreds of members whose stories are not part of this collection. These essays are however a good snapshot in time of what it means to be members of a healthy and vibrant urban church during a pandemic. In 2022 Plymouth will be celebrating our 175th anniversary. My hope is that these essay/stories will inspire those who celebrate Plymouth at its 200th or 300th anniversaries by giving a glimpse of their predecessors from 2020-21. The pandemic has turned out to have at least 52 blessings.

~ James Waechter