

## **Pilgrim Strangers No More: Fighting 52 Weeks of the Damn Panic with 52 Essays and a Legacy of Community at Plymouth Church**

One member of our Plymouth Church flock calls the COVID-19 pandemic the “damn panic.” That’s about as spiritual as anything else I’ve heard. Some things are so wretched they don’t deserve poetry or high-brow prose.

When the 400th anniversary of the landing of those other Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock in 1620 rolled around, we were in the throes of the damn panic and had no idea how to gather. Our fetes and speakers and readings had been cancelled by a microscopic invader.

Jim Waechter and the History Ministry had the idea that we’d honor the #Mayflower400 with some Congregational essays. He cajoled me into writing the second one and then I wrote an essay about being “voluntold” to write that essay for the New York Daily News on Thanksgiving Day 2020. It was about what 1620 means to me in 2020’s stormy seas (spoiler alert: Plymouth Church) and you can read it [here](#).

That was 52 weeks and 52 essays ago. No one ever planned for that, but I am utterly proud and charmed that so many of you fought back by building a new normal using your tales about God and faith and Congregationalism and Plymouth. I’ve never felt more like a pilgrim than reading your essays, finding strength each week in your struggles, knowing you a little bit better as we isolated. Our community of stories became our salvation. With a little help from the Almighty, of course.

I was charmed by the variety. Some of you went full David Copperfield with your origin tales of childhood religion, wandering off, having kids, joining the church again. Others were more confessional, like a digital AA meeting. You shared your doubts, but you kept coming back, one day at a time. Others spoke of deeds and a few had actually read the Bible. Some glorified

the decades of service to Plymouth and others were almost bitter about searching for a spiritual component in the earthly responsibilities of tending to this New York City block maintenance hog of a real estate legacy built by our church ancestors.

I too have been frustrated sometimes. There were days where we weren't brave enough, where we didn't open these doors quickly enough and where we welcomed everyone but those who needed us most. Sometimes we Zoomed virtually when we could have zagged IRL. I may have reached my limit on packaged Cheetos and bottled water at coffee hour and yearn for a nice Plymouth punch or a lukewarm Greening casserole. And yet we worshipped with our fannies in these pews early on. We lifted our voices again in hymns this summer and opened our doors to pre-schoolers all year long. It's easy to sit at a computer and judge. It's not so simple to disinfect a school or socially distance a sanctuary or preach a sermon relevant to a global plague. Whatever we did, we did it together.

And we wrote, of course. Weekly, we wrote.

And supported each other in real ways too. Fifty-two weeks later, we are still here. And snap, on Thanksgiving Day 2021, we're back in the New York Daily News, reenacting the first harvest feast of 1621 at that other Plimoth by our deeds in the Underground Thrift Store and the many Plymouth Church folk who built and donate to the Brooklyn Heights Community Fridge. You can read that at [here](#).

I love our anniversary Sunday hymn The Shining Shore. I'd have the choir rip off the masks and belt it out every week if Bruce would let me. Over this pandemic year, "our days [have certainly] glided swiftly by" and we have "gird[ed] our loins, my brethren dear," but thanks to your genuine words and our tireless minister, staff and leadership and so many community deeds, we are not "pilgrim strangers."

These 52 essays are a legacy of this community of faith.

Take that, you damn panic.

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Caroline Aiken Koster