

## **The Way of the Pilgrim: A Matter of Heart**

**Mark 1:16-20      Psalm 84**

Our series for Lent: the way of the pilgrim. Biblically, this notion and experience of being a pilgrim, whether by choice or by some form of displacement, is one of the golden threads throughout the Bible: From Noah's watery journey, to Abraham—who was called to leave home and head out to a foreign land, as it says in Hebrews 11, “not knowing where he was going”—to the Exodus out of Egypt and journey to the promised land, and on it goes to Mary and Joseph journeying to Bethlehem then to Egypt and back to Nazareth after the birth of Jesus, to Jesus himself itinerating and bringing large groups with him, to the apostle Paul's missionary journeys, the 2 disciples on the road to Emmaus on Easter day, and the early church who became pilgrim people, some by choice and some because of persecution. God's people are, and always have been, people who are on the move. Even if they aren't physically moving. They move, and are moved, in a variety of ways.

For our purposes this Lenten season, we are journeying with Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, toward Easter. There are some highs and lows on this journey, which we'll look at in coming weeks (we actually looked at a high a couple weeks ago with the transfiguration experience, and a low last week, with the journey

into wilderness). This morning we take a step back and ask: what does it mean to have the heart of a pilgrim. Because that's what makes a pilgrimage a pilgrimage—the intent behind the journey.

## Psalm 84

- <sup>1</sup> How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O LORD Almighty!
- <sup>2</sup> My soul yearns, even faints,  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh cry out  
for the living God.
- <sup>3</sup> Even the sparrow has found a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may have her young—  
a place near your altar,  
O LORD Almighty, my King and my God.
- <sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who dwell in your house;  
they are ever praising you.
- <sup>5</sup> Blessed are those whose strength is in you,  
who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.
- <sup>6</sup> As they pass through the Valley of Baca,  
they make it a place of springs;  
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
- <sup>7</sup> They go from strength to strength,  
till each appears before God in Zion.
- <sup>8</sup> Hear my prayer, O LORD God Almighty;  
listen to me, God of Jacob.
- <sup>9</sup> Look upon our shield, O God;  
look with favor on your anointed one.

<sup>10</sup> Better is one day in your courts  
than a thousand elsewhere;  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.  
<sup>11</sup> For the LORD God is a sun and shield;  
the LORD bestows favor and honor;  
no good thing does he withhold  
from those whose walk is blameless.  
  
<sup>12</sup> O LORD Almighty,  
blessed is the one who trusts in you.

This is the word of the Lord.

Our focus this morning is on verses 5-7:

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are those whose strength is in you,  
who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.  
<sup>6</sup> As they pass through the Valley of Baca,  
they make it a place of springs;  
They go from strength to strength,  
till each appears before God in Zion.

Think of great pilgrimages that people make—literal ones, like the Camino de Santiago from France to the coast of Spain, and the pilgrimage in Italy from Siena to Florence to Assisi, and then Rome. I was invited to a pilgrimage this summer to the island of Inishmore, Ireland, where Celtic Christianity began in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Then there's Mecca, and to the Holy Land and other sacred sites.

Have any of you made one? Why do people make pilgrimages? What's the goal of these?

Pilgrimages are about the journey of discovery. They're about questions, and curiosity—curiosity about what's out there, but also what's going on in me and in you, our reactions, our responses to people, places and events. Sometimes the journey is about adversity, and uncertainty (that's next week's topic). And ultimately pilgrimage is about the joy of arriving somewhere new or different, literally and figuratively—of having our horizons expanded and our vision clarified. Pilgrimage is about the willingness to be changed by what we're seeing and experiencing, and having an openness to that transformation.

Here is a quote for you to ponder: "To journey without being changed is to be a nomad. To change without journeying is to be a chameleon. To journey and be transformed by the journey is to be a pilgrim." (Mark Nepo) Food for thought!

Again, it's not always about making a physical journey. It's a matter of heart. St. Teresa of Avila (spunky 16<sup>th</sup> century nun) once wrote: "I was in need of great pilgrimage, so I sat still for three days and God came to me." You see, it's all about heart's intent. What we want or desire, or hope for, as we embark on a

journey of some kind. Even if that journey takes place at home. (lots of that opportunity with the virus spreading!)

This is what the Psalmist is talking about in Psalm 84: this person isn't necessarily travelling to a place on foot; they're marveling at the beauty of the temple, which represented God's presence, and beauty. And somehow this reminder of God's beauty and presence brought them to a place of realizing that true pilgrimage lies within: "Blessed are those whose hearts are set on pilgrimage." In the Hebrew language this can be literally translated as, "in whose heart are the roadways/highways." The real roadways are within.

And the realization the psalmist comes to is that pilgrimage results in an inner renewal and strengthening: "As they pass through the valley of Baca"—which was a real place, a desert lowland that came to symbolize and represent low times of life, or drudgery, the barren places of life—"as they pass through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs." In other words, with a pilgrim mind and heart, wilderness and desert become a fruitful place and an experience of new life. "They go from strength to strength" the Psalmist says. That's why people set their hearts on pilgrimage: to receive strength, in increasing measure. Strength of heart and soul; strength of faith. New insight, expanded vision.

Even though many people did make a physical pilgrimage to Jerusalem annually for the feast of Passover, not everyone could go, or did go. But they went there in heart and mind through practices and rituals and remembrances and prayer. And stories/testimonies of others who did go and shared how the experienced moved them.

Being pilgrims means being on a journey of discovery. And a significant part of it is self-discovery. Learning about ourselves. When Jesus called the disciples, as we heard, he wasn't just conscripting them for service, but calling them to a journey of discovering themselves: their untapped gifts and abilities, as well as their weaknesses and dark side too! That's part of the discovery. To help them (us) overcome those and be strengthened and equipped even more. Just walk with Peter from his first days with Jesus to until the end of his life. See how he was changed. See how he gained insight and skill; see how he learned about his pride and ego through failure. And, see how he became the rock that Jesus said he would become.

In thinking about a pilgrimage of heart, and being pilgrim people, I playfully thought of this in terms of the difference between being a pilgrim and being a tourist. Tourists want to see highlights and well-known historical places, and have

the fun experiences and eat the great or unusual food; to see the sights, get the pictures and souvenirs, then return.

Pilgrims, by contrast, are on a journey of discovery and encounter, which sometimes involves... the valley of Baca, and out of the way places and unexpected experiences that may not be on the map so to speak—they weren't in the planning brochure!—with an openness and desire to be changed by what they're experiencing, even if it's a "lowlight" and not a highlight.

Tourists pack and carry stuff from home with them, and return home with it all, and more sometimes. Pilgrims travel lightly, and are willing to part with the extra 'baggage' they are carrying that they realize they don't need any more. That's part of the journey: a willingness to let go of attachments to things—not just physical things, but things like security and control and "my way." Ego and such. Like the first disciples that Jesus called to follow him—dropped their nets. Literally they dropped their nets, but symbolically this represented a willingness to let go—perhaps of a way of life, or of routines, attitudes and perceptions, of ego (esp. in Peter's case) in order to discover a new way of being, and to be given a new purpose ("fishers of people"), and new direction. It took them a while to figure this out, though...

Because disciples exhibited a religious tourist mindset from time to time. For example, the gospels writers record that when they had arrived in Jerusalem, and Jesus has taught in the temple, one day this happened (from Mark 13:1-2): “As Jesus came out of the temple, the disciples began saying to him, “Look, what large stones, and what grand buildings!” This was likely the first time they had seen the temple in Jerusalem, massive and adorned with precious stones and gold inlays, spectacular columns and carved stone and wood, etc. Think Cathedrals in Europe. They’re impressed, so they got out their smart phones and starting taking pictures and sending snapchats and posting on Instagram. Missing the point. Jesus responded to them, in effect, by saying: one day these buildings are going to be destroyed by the Romans. Then what? In what, or whom, will your faith lie? Yes, we’ve made the journey to Jerusalem, and yes, here we are at this temple, which looks spectacular. But our journey isn’t about this place; it’s about what I’m doing, and what we’ve experienced together along the way. And, where your journey will take you from here.

God calls his people to be pilgrims on a journey of faith. We’re set on a journey that helps us become closer to God, grow in God, and become more aware of and aligned with our true selves in God.

I was in a small group years ago—part Bible study, part prayer group. As part of our getting to know each other the leader had us take time over the course of a week or two to re-tell our life's story up to that point in terms of a journey, or pilgrimage. We could simply write it down, or draw it in pictures, map it out, make a timeline; whatever was the most effective way to tell your story.

And answer such questions as:

- Where have you been, and what marked the beginning and ending of those times and places?
- What names would you give to those places, or times of life, those situations and events? (for example, "Valley of \_\_\_\_\_", "Road to/from \_\_\_\_\_", "Mount \_\_\_\_\_" or "Season of \_\_\_\_\_" etc)
- What did you pack with you? What did you leave behind?
- Who came with you on the journey? Who departed?
- What discoveries did you make?
- What did you learn about yourself (both the light and dark side)?
- How has God met you and led you along the way?
- Where are you now? What is this place/time called?

The big aha, for me, in looking back was to see how clearly that God was present at every step of the journey. The highs and the lows. The times I wandered off the path into the tall weeds or got lost in the woods. And when I returned (or, was led back!). The other aha: the journey is never in a straight line, or on level ground. I don't think it's supposed to be.

Where are you on the journey with God, and in God? I think a great question to ask ourselves is, not just "Who am I?" but "Who am I in God?" And "Who am I becoming, in God?" as we walk the pilgrim pathway.