

“PILGRIMAGE: PLACES TO GO”

Matthew 4:12-25; John 21:15-19

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Jesus moved around a lot. As Matthew tells us he was actually in Nazareth, Capernaum, other parts of Galilee, Judea including Jerusalem. He was known throughout all of Syria. He walked a lot and he expected his followers to walk with him. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is always on the move, and with some urgency. It's no accident that we often speak of faith as a journey. Acts tells the story of the growth of the church; growth that occurs as Jesus' followers travel around the Roman Empire.

This summer Janet and I have been reading and thinking about pilgrimage, a specific kind of journey, a kind of journey that lies at the heart of Christian faith. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson defines it as a “journey with a holy purpose to a place with spiritual significance.” People travel to a wide variety of sacred places hoping to connect with God in a deeper way: Iona in Scotland, Avebury in England, Hallgrímskirkja in Iceland, the Santuario de Chimayo, Lourdes, the Vatican, and the Holy Land. Other faiths have their sacred places as well, Mecca perhaps being the one best known to us, but there are many Buddhist and Hindu temples where people of faith expect to encounter God in new and profound ways.

Many of the places we visited this summer became “thin places” for us revealing not just the wondrous work of our Creator, but the grace and love and mystery of God indwelling that creation: The loons on Ice Lake unconcerned about our very human presence as they swam and fed close to the shore we were standing on. Good looks, as we say in the birding world, are unusual with loons. There were the Bison refusing to recognize the right of way of cars on the highway as they slowed traffic for two hours, occasionally brushing alongside the car, as if to say we were here first, inviting us to be patient as they meandered from one meadow to the next. The sudden appearance of the jagged peaks of the Grand Tetons as the fog momentarily shifted, the sudden eruption of geysers, the bubbling of pools, and the steaming of fumaroles reminding us that we were standing within the rim of volcanic territory. Never before had I seen river valleys so broad, waterfalls so individual, and mountain passes so precipitous.

I have always experienced nature as a lens through which I encounter the sacred, but these wild encounters reinforce the reality that God cannot be contained by a doctrine, that my ideas about God are at best approximations. Sacred places almost always expand our experience of God.

In our faith journeys we are always on our way to some sacred place. Sometimes we have a specific place in mind and are intentional about the path and destination, but not always. More often the destination is shrouded in mystery. We may not even be aware that we have left port.

Granberg-Michaelson tells the story of three Irish pilgrims who decided to set out on the ocean in a boat intentionally without oars. Seven days later, as they were at the end of their provisions, they landed in Cornwall, believing that they were in the place that God intended.

Something urged them to set out, some intuition or perhaps dissatisfaction. This is how it is for us often. We sense a need for change. Pilgrimages begin this way, sometimes with a definite sacred place in mind, sometimes with a vague sense that wherever one ends up, the sacred will be present. As we walk by faith, we undertake not just a journey, but more specifically a series of pilgrimages defined by a holy purpose to a sacred place.

Peter begins his pilgrimage with an invitation to walk with Jesus. The gospels aren't terribly interested in telling us about what's going on in people's heads. I expect whatever Peter was thinking, Matthew wants us to understand the strong pull that Jesus had on people. He changed people. He moved people. But Peter was not forced to follow Jesus. He willingly left his job, and I think we can assume that at least part of his motivation was the hope for something better. And as Jesus moves from town to town, healing people, teaching about the kingdom of God, and forgiving sins, Peter encounters the sacred again and again and again.

Eventually he gets to the place where he is able to "fish for people." This is where someone else will tell him his next destination, where he will go places that he doesn't want to go, where his faith will lead him into conflict with the powers that be, where the only thing that will sustain him and give him courage for the journey is love. "Peter, do you love me?"

When Peter began his journey, he hoped for something better, and as the gospels continue his story, we can surmise that he was sustained by the love of Jesus. Jan Richardson wrote, "Beloved is where we begin..." This was enough to carry Peter and us to the next sacred place, but as the road gets more difficult, more dangerous, maybe it's not quite enough. Peter denies Jesus three times on the night of his arrest. Being loved by Jesus didn't supply the necessary courage to put his own life on the line.

But Jesus doesn't ask Peter, "Do you love me?" because he wanted to emphasize Peter's guilt. It wasn't a rebuke or an expression of disappointment. It was an invitation for Peter to travel to the next sacred place where being loved by God is transformed into love for God. God loves us no matter what, but the gospel hope is that love will change us, become part of us. As Paul writes, "Love believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...." Love, as it indwells us, gives us the courage we need when the path becomes difficult.

One can see in Peter's faith journey a truth about the nature of pilgrimage that Granberg-Michaelson emphasized as we discussed it at Ring Lake Ranch. Pilgrimage is both an outward and an inward journey. There's the physical place we are going to, but we are often hoping for an inward change. People go to Lourdes in the hope that the water will heal their bodies, but it's not magic they seek, but an encounter with the divine. In

pilgrimage, we encounter physical realities that speak to spiritual questions. We experience physical things with spiritual significance. We hold together the inward and outer journey.

Jesus healed the sick, made the blind to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear. He forgave sinners and even silenced demons. He honored the outsider and made a place for women at the table of faith. He addressed the things in the world that made people less than whole. But for Jesus, it was never just about the physical. His mission was not to heal the sick. He healed the sick as a demonstration that the kingdom of God had come near. He was about being a vehicle that brought the love and presence of God into the world. The good news that he preached was that God is near.

Sacred places are places where God comes near. We go on pilgrimages to sacred places especially in times when we feel God is not near. Peter wasn't getting it in his job, so he left to go on pilgrimage with Jesus. Over and over this summer, I felt the near presence of God in the beauty of the earth. But I wasn't paying a lot of attention to the rest of the world. I didn't forget that war dominated many parts of the globe. I didn't forget about the obstacles faced by the homeless, the unemployed and the underemployed. I know that injustice did not take a sabbatical. What I'm learning is that especially when I'm not on sabbatical, I still need to be on pilgrimage. It's more important to seek out the presence of God, when it seems God has left town.

I know we're not going to eradicate poverty or dismantle racism, certainly not anytime soon, but pilgrimage reminds me that I only have to take the next step. I know congregational vitality is a lot of work, but I think we're more vital now than before the pandemic because we've kept walking one step at a time. I'm not talking just about me but about the church. I feel like as a congregation we've been on pilgrimage for a number of years now to a specific place, and even though I don't know what it looks like or where it is, I feel the near presence of God as we walk this path. Is it challenging? Yes.

I remember a number of years ago when we addressed theological questions in our adult education program. Spong, the noted Episcopalian Bishop was popular with many of you because he challenged us to rethink many of the traditional church doctrines: the Virgin Birth, the divinity of Jesus, our understanding of atonement. Several people mentioned to me their discomfort with saying the Apostle's Creed because the language didn't fit our modern scientific worldview. I enjoyed those conversations because thinking about faith was a peculiar passion of mine and still is really.

We should think about what we mean when we say that Jesus died for our sins. How is it that his death on a cross 2000 years ago guarantees me forgiveness today? Twenty years ago, we knew that many of the answers given to that question were inadequate and we were keen to come to a correct understanding. We're not any less keen in thinking about our faith, but we are less worried about getting the doctrine right and more attentive to living out faith in the world, more attentive to the love that binds us together as a community of faith.

I love this image that Wesley put before us: The church has too often mistaken the weather report for the actual weather. Our racism discussion group has spent a lot of time the last two years talking about racism, but I'm sensing that over the summer a shift took place where they want to more actively engage it. I've been reading through some of the summaries of conversations from the listening project this summer, and I'm seeing some strong support for the session's decision to become a Matthew 25 congregation. That's not terribly surprising given that Westminster has always prioritized mission, especially hunger ministries, but I'm sensing in some of the responses a desire to add to the service we've done a more intimate connection. Again, I don't know what that looks like, but I think it's similar to Peter's journey. We have found great comfort and encouragement in the experience of being loved by God. But I'm wondering whether our love for God isn't becoming more prominent.

Of course, being loved by God and growing in love for God are not so easily separated. The writer of first John is right to remind us that God first loved us, but in the life of faith those two aspects feed on one another creating one of those never-ending feedback loops that strengthens the faith of each of us and deepens the love of all of us within the faith and I think beyond the faith community.

I feel so fortunate to belong to a faith community that is walking with holy intent to the places where God is near, to a community that thinks about faith with a view to living out faith. As an aside, I hope that many of you will participate in the new opportunities being provided by Nancy to engage in spiritual practices that aim at helping us draw near to God, and that you will embrace the specific initiatives that flow from being a Matthew 25 congregation.

We'll be talking more about pilgrimage the next three weeks. I think it's a helpful lens not just for us, but for the whole church to think about the future. These words from Granberg-Michaelson's book should give you an idea of some of the things we'll be talking about.

"In whatever time and situation you find yourself, several things will likely be true: the spiritual life as a lifeline, patience as a necessity, and the need to discern what you will take into the future and what is best left behind. This attitude of discernment and dependence upon unpredictable grace, on God's Spirit, helps outline the path ahead."

We have places to go, sacred places. The journey will likely be challenging and uncomfortable at times. But as with most pilgrimages, the next step is the most important. We will walk by faith, but as Michaelson says, "we will all be walking our way into faith" as well. May God bless our steps. Amen.