

The Spiritual Practice of Pilgrimage

Based on II Chronicles 30:1-5, Psalm 122, and Luke 2:41-52

Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on Sunday, October 15, 2023

The dictionary defines a pilgrimage as “an individual's journey through life, entailing personal growth and exploration.” In religious terms, the word pilgrimage is often used to describe “a particular spiritual focus or pathway which it is believed will lead to an encounter with God.”

It's probably pretty clear to you that in my grand plan for this sermon series on spiritual practices, I originally saved this practice to the end of the series because today was to be my last message before leading a pilgrimage to the Holy Land one week from today. But with or without our particular trip to Israel, I think the spiritual practice of pilgrimage is still worth looking at, as we journey through our lives, especially in a time when our lives, our national politics, and our world are so divided.

Our ancient relatives in the land of Israel knew an awful lot about division AND the way that a pilgrimage can bring a divided people back together again. The passage we read from II Chronicles chapter 30 was believed to have taken place during the reign of Hezekiah, who ruled over Israel from about 715 BCE to 686. He and his father king before him – Ahaz – had the unenviable task of trying to reunite the people of Israel after they had been divided and conquered by the mighty Assyrians and their brutal and cunning king Tiglath Pileser. During the Assyrian dominance, some of the Hebrews had been carried off into exile, while others were prisoners in their own land from about 743 to 727.

For that entire time, not only did the people of Israel live in fear and captivity, but they were denied all of their dearly held religious practices, including the most significant one – celebrating the Passover and taking a pilgrimage up to the temple of Jerusalem to do so. The Passover, as you may remember, was the Jews' celebration of God's liberating work on their behalf, freeing them from their long captivity in Egypt at the hands of Pharaoh. Hezekiah wisely realized that there could be no more fitting a way to celebrate their long-awaited liberation from the Assyrians than to get all the people back together by re-establishing the nation-wide pilgrimage to the temple at Jerusalem to celebrate this incredible holy day. So, Hezekiah sends out his servants with letters calling the 12 tribes of Israel to take this pilgrimage together once again, to be reunited both with God and with one another.

On a pilgrimage – especially an annual or regular one – one of the things

we can do is to remember and relive the stories of our past, the times we took this pilgrimage before or all the times when Yahweh faithfully brought us through hardship safely to the other side. When we take a familiar journey to a special and holy place, we can't help but remember with acute vividness and profound gratitude all that we experienced in our previous journeys. The Psalmist captures this very same spirit in the 122nd Psalm. "I rejoiced with those who said to me 'Let us go up to the house of the Lord.'"

Then in the passage we read from Luke, chronicling an event some 700 years *after* the time of Hezekiah, we see Jesus, himself, along with his family and his entire village, taking that very same pilgrimage that Hezekiah reinstated, to that very same place, for that very same purpose – the Passover feast. Luke writes, "Every year Jesus's parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. When Jesus was 12 years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom..." I can only imagine what it must have been like for that entire town of Nazareth to load up their caravan with camping supplies, food to share, and the various Passover necessities to travel together on that 3-day journey to Jerusalem. On such a journey, people would interact with folks whom they didn't get to see much during the busy work weeks of Nazareth. They'd be able to have different kinds of conversations and share the excitement of going up to Jerusalem, the holiest of cities.

What is it in your life that functions in a similar way? Where do you and your loved ones go each and every year or perhaps even at the same time each year that brings you closer to each other and closer to God? For my family and me, it has always been Bay View. I have such clear and wonderful memories of loading up the family station wagon in Bay Village, Ohio, right when school got out in mid-June, and driving the 7 hours north and west up to this Methodist retreat center for relaxation, restoration, and spiritual renewal. And, of course, this wasn't something we did alone, for we knew that at the very same time of year that we were loading our family car on the west side of Cleveland, 350 other families were heading to the very same destination, albeit from different starting points. But we would all converge on our beloved Bay View. When we got there, we'd quickly dump our suitcases in our rooms and then run to our friends' cottages and our relatives' porches to exchange hugs, stories from the school year, and experience the profound gratitude that we had been able, once again, 'to go up to the temple of the Lord.'

Now, all of us know, especially when you get to be our age, that such wonderful, annual rituals and pilgrimages can start to get interrupted by life...by

change...by sickness... or even war. This is what happened to the people of Israel, as they found themselves conquered and occupied by Tiglath Pileser and the Assyrians. For years they couldn't take that pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. And it made them yearn and hunger for the chance to go back again, to celebrate that Passover feast, not secretly in their own kitchens, but together and publicly in that place that meant so much to them.

It kind of reminded me about how we felt about this place during Covid, when things got shut down so suddenly, and we couldn't take our weekly pilgrimage to this place to worship or to celebrate communion, our Passover meal. During the Covid interruption, we couldn't see each other, hug each other, or sing together. Then do you remember how good it felt when we finally *were* able to come back to this place, to this beautiful and historic sanctuary, and to be together. I hope we haven't lost that appreciation. I hope we haven't once again grown complacent or forgotten just what a gift it is to be together here to do this... As the Psalmist said, "I rejoiced when they said to me 'let us go up to the house of the Lord.'"

If there is one thing I am learning again and again – and the cancellation of this long-awaited Israel trip is just the latest reminder – is that things in our lives can change in an instant. We can go from worshipping together every week to not being able to worship together at all...We can go from having a perfectly healthy spouse or sibling one day to sitting next to their hospital bed as they cling to the life the next...We can go from having a perfectly lucid conversation with our mother or our neighbor one day to having her not able to remember who we are the next. Life is fragile. Life is fleeting. Things can turn in an instant.

The spiritual practice of pilgrimage is designed to help us realize and remember how good God is, how precious togetherness with others is, and how we need to do these sacred, recurring rituals and journeys whenever we can and for however long we can. For it will be those memories from such pilgrimages that will sustain us and give us hope when we can't take them any longer or must set them aside for a season.

I told you about the way my family's annual pilgrimage to Bay View always began, but I want to share with you how it ended each year. At the tail end of the Bay View Chautauqua season, our family would go to the final Sunday evening Vesper concert in the big auditorium, that same facility wherein we had worshipped for the 9-10 Sunday mornings we had been up there. That same facility where some of us had participated in the summer musical production. That same room where we had listened to incredible music performed. And at

that final concert of the season, the final number was always the same – and it still is to this day. Everybody stands and sings, “God be with you till we meet again.” As I’d look around that packed auditorium as a kid, I didn’t really get why people were so emotional about it. A lot of the older folks were sobbing, crying, and wiping their eyes as if it were a funeral. Well, I get it now. This year, as a 61-year-old, I stood for that hymn and balled my eyes out? Why? Because I looked around that room and saw my friend who was just a couple weeks away from a surgical procedure that could end or radically alter his life, and I wondered if he’d even be able to make another pilgrimage to Bay View. I looked around and saw my family friend, who had lost both her mom and her dad in the last couple years and was now singing that song without their accompaniment. I looked up in the balcony and I saw what was left of a family of four. The dad was now too sick to attend and one of the sons had died suddenly in the last year of cancer. Then I thought of my own mom and dad, my grandparents, and even my great grandparents and just how much they all loved being in this auditorium, being in Bay View, being in our little cottage on Maple Street.

I don’t know where you and your loved ones go or used to go on your favorite pilgrimage. But I know it’s important. And if you can’t go back anymore, I hope you can at least look at some pictures of that place and of the people. And I hope you can thank God for those times. I hope you can be grateful for those memories and the special people who helped you make them. Life’s pilgrimages are such precious gifts from God. I know that now in ways I didn’t 20 years ago.

And I want to encourage you to think about a new pilgrimage you can create at this point in your life. Maybe it’s not a big trip anymore to some faraway place. Maybe it’s not done every year but something you can do every month or even every week. Maybe you come here to our chapel on Wednesday evenings for some centering prayer. Maybe, in the spirit of what we talked about last week, you can pick out a lonely friend who could use a weekly visit and go to the holy ground of her couch and just hold her hand for a spell. Maybe your pilgrimage is to the diaper pantry once a week to take them some of the products they need to help poor young moms stay adequately supplied. Maybe once a month you go and visit that prison inmate so you can remind him that he is loved.

The word pilgrimage is defined as “a particular spiritual focus or pathway which it is believed will lead to an encounter with God.” Whether you are 55 or 85, I pray that you will find or create such a pathway, so that you and those who go with you can have an encounter with God. Amen.