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Mark 6:1-13

Ezekiel 2:1-5

Psalm 123

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

July 8, 2018

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Pilgrimage. As you all know...my family and I set out to walk St. Cuthbert's Way last week. It's a 62 mile stretch of country side through the Scottish Borders that honor the life and work of one individual, committed to his faith and dedicated to following Christ. St. Cuthbert lived from 635 to 687 BCE. We only know bits and pieces of his life...but what stories do remain are ones steeped in a belief that he could work great miracles through his prayers. Even as a young boy, he is said to have saved a group of monks from death at sea by kneeling by the shore and praying for their safety.

Pilgrimages tend to have this kind of holy ethos about them – where they mark something or someone as sacred. And, there is something that draws us to these holy individuals who have gone before us – who have experienced a closeness to God that we desperately want to touch – even if it is just tracing their footsteps on well-trodden ground. And, so we walk.

Now, Dwayne and I walked with 3 teenagers which was a certain type of pilgrimage all unto itself. As one pilgrim that we ran into along the way made clear...I am here alone – no wife, no kids, it's GREAT! When we pointed our kids standing off to the side, he quickly backtracked and said...oh, it's just me who wants to be away from the kids as he nodded reassuringly to our kids while winking slightly at me and Dwayne. The inside joke didn't go over my head. We all walk for different reasons. In silence, in community, in families, alone or with strangers we meet along the way. It's what makes our journeys so unique.

I told the kids one day that the beauty of pilgrimage for me often comes by realizing that you will never know the stories of those you pass along the way. But each one is holding on to a powerful need to be there. A powerful need to seek answers and find resolutions, or maybe just to be alone in God's creation for awhile. Step by step, we honor each other's journey.

So, let's first define pilgrimage...at its most basic, pilgrimage is the journey of a person who travels to a holy place. It gets its root from a Latin word that means "through the field." One writer described it this way...*as an "ancient image suggesting a curious soul who walks beyond known boundaries, crosses fields, touches the earth, with a destination in mind and a purpose in heart. The pilgrim is a wayfarer who longs to endure a difficult journey to reach the sacred center of his or her world, a place made holy by a saint, hero, or god."*

I don't know about you but the first thing I noticed in that definition is this idea of a difficult journey. And, really, who wants to spend their vacation on a difficult journey? Why go if the going is so tough? I spent a lot of time thinking about that question. Maybe we go because we want to know that we can. We want to know that we have enough strength, enough courage to

get through the obstacles in front of us. We want to know that we can pull through. We want to find a reason to keep moving and to be reassured that no matter what there is a path forward. We want to pray for grace. We want to know our prayers are heard and we want to feel an answer coming forth. In other words, we take on a difficult journey because we want to be changed. Maybe not into something entirely different, but someone with a stronger faith, more trust, more hope. Someone we can look back on and know that we accomplished something good in this world.

Finding that kind of transformational grace is worth the sore feet and tired legs. It's worth the hours walking in the heat up never ending hills out of breath, hands swollen, sweat dripping down your back as your knees creek a little too loudly. It's worth knowing that someone has gone up these same paths before you, knowing that someone has gotten close to God in this very countryside. Knowing that you are not there alone but in the company of hundreds maybe even thousands who have also embarked on a journey to touch something holy. I'd call that a pretty great vacation.

So, from this definition, we can say that pilgrimage has an element of difficulty to it. Our kids felt it every time we came to a hilltop only to see a higher one in the distance. It felt defeating at times. I know they felt discouraged, wondering if they could make it. At times, I am sure they were even a bit angry at us for making them take another step.

But difficulty is part of the process. We even find those reminders in our Gospel reading. As Jesus is sending out his disciples for their first solo missions, he sends them out in pairs and reminds them that the way will not be easy. He reminds them that people will turn them away but that no matter what they are to keep going. His encouragement seems to stand as a wake up call that the world will not always be in their favor. In fact, it might even be quite the opposite but that the importance of living with purpose, in faith, is far more critical than any doubt within themselves that might arise when the going gets tough.

Jesus himself had already faced that kind of rejection – from his own family and village. He had come with hope and love and good news only to have it shut down with cynicism and criticism. The text from Mark even seems to provide a picture of Jesus' discouragement when we are told he only lays his hands on a few sick people as he could do no deeds of power in this place. He was in essence coming to the top of a hill only to see miles of new mountains stretch out before him. I can only imagine the frustration and discouragement that welled up inside of him. But we know he kept going. And he wanted the disciples to do the same. Why?

I think the answer is caught up in one word...wonder. Because if the first definition of pilgrimage is defined by difficulty, the second definition is defined by wonder. As I heard it stated..."God's intention is that we be wonderfully caught up in the traces of God's glory that fill us and surround us." Because on any pilgrimage, there are moments when grace breaks through. When answers come. When comfort washes over you. When with every step you realize that to keep moving forward means leaving something behind, something that has held

you down, something that has stood in the way of wholeness and goodness. It's wonder at the times that hope prevails when nothing else will and suddenly a spark of God shines forth.

My moment of wonder on St. Cuthbert's Way came at the top of our highest elevation – a place called Wideopen Hill. We had been climbing one elevation at time, having to rest frequently. We had been in the sun the entire walk that morning – through pastures, past cows and sheep, using dirt hewn steps that had been made by hundreds of people and livestock who had climbed each path before us. I couldn't look up and think about how much further it was. All I knew was that we kept climbing over one rock wall after another in an endless patchwork of green and yellow fields.

But finally in the distance were these two horses...standing at the very top of the ridge. It was as though they were there to greet us (although I came to realize that they had probably learned if they stood at that highest point, pilgrims would be so glad to see them, so elated to be at the top that they would feed them whatever snacks were left in their packs). But aside from the more reasonable explanation of why these two horses were there, I saw them as God's little reminder of home. One horse was almost the exact twin of my own horse.

They gently put their heads on our shoulders. One couldn't stop licking Leslie. The other kept nodding his head almost as a way to welcome us to the top. There is no other way to describe that lovely surprise other than the fact that those horses tended to us and gave us time to rest and laugh and simply be together. As we walked away to start our descent, the horses followed for a way, nodding their heads as we made our way past them – maybe saying goodbye and thanks for stopping.

That's wonder. I am sure that Jesus knew that the disciples would face many times when they wouldn't be greeted with such kindness and mercy but he also knew that there would be just as many if not more times that they would be welcomed with love and care, times that their journey would come into focus and the value of the effort made clear.

Brother Curtis Almquist, a monastic with the Society of St. John the Evangelist writes this about wonder...

Not all of life is wonderful. Some days are crushing. The experience of wonder can be very elusive in the face of suffering, injustice, loss, and death. And yet, you can feel more than one thing at a time. Being attentive to the wonder of life will counterbalance what is not wonderful and will make a world of difference to you. In the best of times and in the worst of times, opening the door of your soul to wonder will help you pray your life, your amazing life, with hope and zeal....

Pilgrimage opens your heart to the wonder that is all around us, even in the midst of difficult times. Pilgrimage reminds us that we won't always have an easy road but we will have a road filled with grace...if we just take the time to look around and notice. With each step along that sacred path we find glimpses of God in the world around us and in one another. And, so we walk. And, let us thank God for the journey. Amen.