

Pilgrimage: Meeting God in the Journey of Life
Matthew 2:1-12
January 6, 2008

Last week our family traveled to Southern California to see the Rose Parade on New Year's Day. We "crashed" my aunt and uncle's annual party on the streets of Pasadena. Our journey arose not just for the enjoyment of one of the world's most famous parades; for me, our journey was an opportunity to share one of my favorite childhood experiences with my son. As a youth I frequently joined my extended family, spending New Year's Eve on a flatbed truck along the parade route, chatting with friendly and happy passersby, and observing the thousands who brought chairs, sleeping bags, camp stoves, and even old sofas in order to claim a front row seat. This time we did spend New Year's Eve daylight staking out our place for 120 people along the parade route, but we spent the night in warm, cozy beds, while others secured our location! Given the good night's sleep, it was probably the first time I really was awake enough to see and enjoy the parade itself! In addition to the parade, we had a reunion of sorts with a portion of my large family, sharing stories of life events and revisiting fond memories of the past. I relived a joyous highlight of my childhood and Jeff came to know the same adventure and my family in a more special way. For me it was akin to a mild form of personal pilgrimage, an experience to reconnect with my roots and my family.

The experience of pilgrimage is popular these days. It is evident in memoirs that are on the best-seller lists. Elizabeth Gilbert's book has been a top seller for many weeks. It is titled *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India, and Indonesia*. At the age of 34 she spent a year traveling in each of these countries as she was recovering from a divorce, a volatile rebound relationship, and a bout of depression. She said, "I wanted to explore the art of pleasure in Italy, the art of devotion in India and, in Indonesia, the art of balancing the two." Greg Mortensen's *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace One School at a Time* tells of his unsuccessful attempt to climb K2 which unexpectedly led to a newfound mission. He is fighting the war on terror by building schools to educate children in Pakistan.

In a recent article in *The Christian Century*, Arthur Paul Boers writes of the resurgence of spiritual practice of pilgrimage. In medieval times there were three prominent destinations for spiritual pilgrims: Rome, the Holy Land, and the Camino de Santiago in Spain. When pilgrimage was nearly universally rejected by Protestant Reformers, the concept became inward. "Now the original sense of pilgrimage as a concrete physical spiritual practice is being recovered by broad sections of the Christian community and by people beyond the church's walls as well....Some scholars argue that involvement in pilgrimage increases as churchgoing diminishes. Six thousand shrines and sites in Western Europe now draw as many as 100 million pilgrims annually."¹

The story of the magi's visit to Jesus is a pilgrimage. In ancient times it was widely believed that new stars appeared when great rulers were born. Such a rumor circulated at the birth of Alexander the Great. The magi followed the star, which led them to a child born to be "king of the Jews." They worshiped him, offering their gifts. They returned home by another route, forever changed by their journey.

Edward Thornton uses the insights of Joseph Campbell to define pilgrimage as “a journey to a Holy Place in order to return transformed and bring wisdom and healing to those back home.”ⁱⁱ

While we may occasionally make individual pilgrimages to specific locations, such as the Holy Land, or the land of our ancestral roots, we also might think of life as a pilgrimage. The different seasons and stages of life each offer their unique adventures, challenges, and opportunities for growth.

A journey begins with leaving, an ending. Oftentimes the transition is physical – a move to a new community, the changing of jobs, the loss of a relationship. At other times the leaving is internal: the formation of a new vision or a decision to leave behind a sour attitude in exchange for a fresh one. Sometimes the leaving is not even recognized until we are further along the journey and we look back to see how we have changed and moved on from the past. On occasion we set out into newness for reasons that are not always clear and we move toward a goal that is equally vague.

People of faith are on a quest for God. This is a lifelong journey, for the evolving circumstances of life give us ongoing opportunities to learn and grow. It is often true that the more we learn, the deeper we desire to grow. The important task is to stay awake during the journey. The meaning is not found in arriving at a destination, but in the traveling itself. Our focus is not so much on knowing with certainty as on searching for God amidst the mysteries of life. We grow deeper when we seek not the right answers, but when we ask new questions.

I’ve been pondering the significant changes in my personal life in the past four years. I left one ministry setting to come to this one. My mother died. The care we need to offer my developmentally disabled brother has increased. My mother-in-law now lives closer to us so that we can assist in her care at this stage in her life. All of these events have impacted my own journey. Dreams I’ve had about travel and retirement location have been set aside. Much more about my future suddenly seems uncertain. At times I’ve struggled with resentment of all the additional demands. A growing edge has been accepting these new dimensions and asking new questions in order to discover the learning they offer. The road has taken some different turns, but the journey continues to hold great value and rich experiences.

Carlos Castaneda suggests that the important question to ask of any journey is: “Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn’t, it is of no use. Both paths lead nowhere; but one has a heart, the other doesn’t. One makes for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong; the other weakens you.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The central question is: “Does this path have a heart?” Are you doing what is meaningful to you and important to others? Are you doing more than surviving, more than breathing in and breathing out? Who or what would you miss if tomorrow you disappeared?

No single path is perfect. There are only some paths that are more important, more meaningful, more fulfilling, more right than others. Inside ourselves, we know instinctively what those are. Nothing is perfect but everything contributes to the perfecting of the spirit, the soul, the character, and the heart. What happens to us is not as important as what we allow it to do to us.^{iv} “One path makes for a joyful journey...the other will make you curse your life.”

I appreciate the insights of Jim Fowler and Sam Keen, who said “the world is no longer a problem to be solved but a mystery in which to participate—to be enjoyed—together.”^v When we look at life not as a destination to reach, not as a problem to be solved, but as a mystery in which to participate, as a mystery to enjoy together, we find holy places all around us. Holy places where God is met and we are transformed. Holy places of healing and wholeness. Holy moments tinged with the loving grace of God. Holy people bearing gifts of presence, compassion, and support.

Recall the definition of pilgrimage I shared earlier: “A pilgrimage is a journey to a Holy Place in order to return transformed and bring wisdom and healing to those back home.” When we consider the experiences of life to be holy ground, they become occasions for our transformation and renewal. They enhance our lives so that we have even richer gifts to offer to others, gifts of wisdom and healing.

In a book called *The Christmas Eve Storyteller*, Edward Hays imagines personalities for the three wise men as they return home by a different route. Each had been on a personal quest. Balthasar went seeking nobility. Melchior sought some way to escape death. Caspar called himself an agnostic king. Though skeptical, he sought a religious experience that would confirm the existence of God. He especially had been disappointed by the shabby stable, the mewling infant, and the peasant parents.

Each came with an expensive gift and left with something more precious. Hays ends his story this way:

“I, Balthasar, have seen the beginning of a new age, the end of a time when only a select few are given reverence, treated as gods come to earth. I have seen the end to kings and queens as the anointed ones, for now every person will be seen as royal, unique and possessed of great dignity.”

“I, Melchior, have seen the death of death. Now I see only life in countless forms of transformation.”

“And I, Caspar, what have I seen? I have seen God, and now I see God everywhere!”^{vi}

Our lives are pilgrimages, for we find ourselves on holy ground, participating in mysteries rich in wonder and growth. Our journey through life provides numerous opportunities for transformation, whereby we cultivate the gifts of healing and wisdom to share with others. May we cherish the pilgrimages we have been given, be attentive to the holy presence of God all around us, and grow deeper through all the changing seasons of life.

ⁱ Arthur Paul Boers, “Walking lessons: The practice of pilgrimage,” *The Christian Century*, Dec. 25, 2007, Vol. 124, No. 26, p. 22.

ⁱⁱ Edward E. Thornton, *To Hell and Beyond: Images of the Spiritual Journey in Dante’s Comedy* (Louisville, 1987), p. 1. Quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. 13., No. 2, January 2002, p. 10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, quoted by Joan Chittister, *The Monastic Way*, January 2005.

^{iv} Joan Chittister, *The Monastic Way*, January 2005.

^v Jim Fowler and Sam Keen, *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith*, ed. Jerome Berryman (Waco: Word Books, 1978), p. 123. Quoted by W. Paul Jones, “Traveling the Yellow Brick Road,” *Weavings*, Vol. 17, No. 2, March/April 2002, p. 45.

^{vi} Edward M. Hays, *The Christmas Eve Storyteller* (Forest of Peace Publishing, 1999). Quoted by Rev. Bob Olmstead, January 5, 1996.

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