

PILGRIMAGE -- A SACRED JOURNEY



Scripture:

Psalm 65:6-13

⁶By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. ⁷You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples. ⁸Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.

⁹You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. ¹⁰You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. ¹¹You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. ¹²The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, ¹³the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

Hebrews 11 (selected verses); 12:1-2

^{12:1}Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



Our guest preacher was The Rev. Sue Fleenor who retired from pastoral ministry in June 2016 after serving three installed and five interim positions over the course thirty-five years. The last seventeen years she had the joy and privilege of serving as pastor of Knox Presbyterian Church of Santa Rosa. Sue lives in Santa Rosa with her long-time companion/spouse, Lynn Jones, who retired in 2016 after serving for forty-five years as a preschool teacher and director. She was the start-up director for our Rosebud Preschool. In September 2017 Sue walked portions of the Camino de Santiago de Compostella, an ancient spiritual pilgrimage across northern Spain.

PILGRIMAGE – A SACRED JOURNEY

It is good to be with you this morning. I am grateful to Cindy for inviting me to talk about my experience of walking the *Camino de Santiago*, an ancient spiritual pathway across northern Spain.

DEFINING PILGRIMAGE

Pilgrimage has been defined as a journey in search of spiritual well-being. I would define pilgrimage as a sacred journey – a journey embarked upon with the intention of drawing nearer to the Divine and being transformed by that encounter.

Now you need not go to Spain or the Holy Land or the Lady of Guadalupe Basilica in Mexico City, or any one of many other sacred destinations in the world, in order to set off on a pilgrimage.

When you and I first heard Jesus call our name and say, "Follow me," and we followed, we became pilgrims on a sacred journey, pilgrims on a life-long walk of faith.

As such we joined the likes of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Ruth and Naomi, David the Psalmist and Isaiah the prophet, Peter and Paul, Mary and Martha and Mary of Magdalene, and generations of people that followed, all who "by faith" devoted themselves to the will and way of God.

To be on such a sacred journey does not require hiking boots or walking sticks nor a backpack or a passport. What it does require is a desire and a commitment to be on the road with Jesus. He is our guide and companion on the road. He is also our greatest teacher and example when it comes to loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving our neighbor as our self.

Some of us are called though to seek out and walk ancient paths, to set us aside time to enter into the rhythm and silence of walking for hours and miles and days and weeks at a time, in order to commune more deeply with God.

"THE WAY"

I received this call about five or six years ago after watching the movie "*The Way*." This movie,

starring Martin Sheen, is the fictional story of Tom Avery, an American who goes to France following the death of his adult son, Daniel, who had been killed in the Pyrenees Mountains during a storm while walking the *Camino de Santiago*. Tom's purpose is initially to retrieve his son's remains. However, in a combination of grief and homage to his son, Tom decides to walk the ancient spiritual trail where his son died, taking Daniel's ashes with him.

This movie had such a profound impact on me that I knew that one day I wanted to walk all or part of the *Camino de Santiago*. That's exactly what I did last September with a dear friend, Terry Swehla.

CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

The legendary five-hundred mile long pilgrimage route begins at St. Jean Pied de Port in northwest France with a trek up and over the Pyrenees Mountains and ends at the Cathedral de Compostella in Santiago in northwestern Spain.

Walking twelve or more miles a day over the course of two and a half weeks was physically challenging and thoroughly exhausting at times. Yet, this was counter-balanced with a sense of spiritual exhilaration. Immersed in the wonder and beauty of creation, removed from the twenty-four, seven news cycle and the many distractions of modern life, plus walking in silence for hours at a time, every step of my Camino pilgrimage was an opportunity to attune my heart and spirit to God. I was on a sacred journey.

The *Camino de Santiago* is also known as the Way of St. James. Tradition has it that the remains of St. James the Great are buried in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. As you may recall James and his old brother, John, were fisherman, who left everything to follow Jesus, thus becoming with Simon and Andrew the first of Jesus' twelve disciples.

Since the Middle Ages Christians have been going on pilgrimage to Santiago in reverent tribute to St. James and to draw nearer to God. There are sculptures and artistic renditions of St. James like these all along the Camino.

Also seen all along the Camino are scallop shells on shops and homes, bridges and fences, sidewalks and sculptures. The scallop shell has long been the symbol of the Camino de Santiago. In addition to yellow arrows and concrete pillars, yellow scallop

shells serve as the primary directional guide for walking the Camino. If one loses their way on the Camino the best way to get back on this ancient path is to look for a scallop shell.

SCALLOP SHELLS AND ST. JAMES

One mythical story concerning the scallop shell centers around James. According to legend, James spent time preaching the gospel in Spain. He wasn't very successful, so he returned to Jerusalem. Later, just fourteen years after the death of Jesus, he too was killed, martyred for being among Jesus' inner circle. James disciples shipped his body to the Iberian Peninsula to be buried in what is now Santiago where James preached the gospel in the first century. The story goes that off the coast of Spain, a heavy storm hit the ship, and the body was lost to the ocean. After some time, however, it washed ashore - miraculously undamaged, covered in scallop shells.

Another story about this Camino symbol is that after medieval pilgrims walked across Europe to the Cathedral in Santiago, they then walked another ninety miles to the Atlantic Ocean to the beaches and cliffs called Finesterre – a Roman word meaning the end of the Earth. There they discarded their clothes and stepped into the ocean waters to wash themselves from their long and exhausting journey. It represented for them a fresh start and was a re-affirmation of their baptism. Then before returning home, they scooped a scallop shell from the sea and attached it to their sacks or walking stick to prove to folks back home that they actually made it all the way and that they were renewed and transformed by the journey.

I wore a scallop shell on my pack given to me by a dear friend in Christ who walked all five-hundred miles of the pilgrimage at the age of seventy. It symbolized for me that I was on a sacred journey, a spiritual walk that began the moment of my baptism as an infant.

THE PYRENEES

On the first morning of our Camino walk the foothills of the Pyrenees were blanketed in cold, misty fog. It was also quite windy. As we entered the brick walkway of the village of St. Jean Pied de Port and placed our feet on the bronze scallop shell that marks the start of one's Camino, it began to rain. I raised my hands to the heavens and shouted

to God, "Seriously!" my usual word of complaint. I was already anxious about whether I had the stamina and fortitude to walk over the Pyrenees. The rain added to my anxiety. Yet this was where I was called to be, so all I could do was set out and hope for the best.

On the Pyrenees, as the path kept winding upward and onward, it was difficult to find my stride. At some point the Spirit of God blessed me with the simple melody and cadence of a song that I sang in my head. It was a mantra of sorts that helped me find the rhythm I needed to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

***"I am strong—I am strong in the Lord" (3x)
I am strong, I am strong in the Lord.***

**A few days later I was gifted with a second
verse, then later a third
and a fourth verse:**

***My God-- is my sure and certain strength
(3X)***

My God, my God, -- my strength.

**And as we neared Santiago, a chorus came to
heart and mind.**

***Ultreya et Suseia (3x)
Onward and higher in the Lord.***

This was my walking song along the Camino. It strengthened me when my feet and legs were sore and weary. It also strengthened my inner being. Not only did my body find my stride, my spirit found its own rhythmic stride as well, helping draw me nearer to God. With the song often playing in the background of my interior thoughts, my body and my spirit joyfully welcomed each coming day with a sense of adventure.

BEAUTY

What I soon discovered was that walking the Camino was not about how far to the next village or about getting to the ultimate destination of Santiago. It was about being deliberately attentive to the present moment, to each step along the way. Touching new and holy ground with each eager footfall, my eyes and my heart were open to all that God wanted to reveal to me. More often, than not, it was beauty.

Like the psalmist, I often lifted my heart in praise because beauty was everywhere: in the strata of misty mountains, winding rivers and medieval bridges waiting to be crossed, cows and horses and their cowbells clanging in lush meadows, pathways lined with eucalyptus, birch, or fir trees, fields of corn and sunflowers ready for harvest, and more.

It was not only the wonder and beauty of the Camino that drew me closer to God, it was being immersed in silence and solitude for hours at a time. This included moments of silence and prayer in modest village churches and opulent city cathedrals. It was always a delight to come upon a simple, rustic church on the Camino way. It's where we rested, caught our breath, and were still before God in prayer. It was in these chapel times that I had the joy and privilege of bringing before God the many folks on my prayer list and their litany of need and concern.

SMALL STONES AND AN EARRING

Pilgrims on the Camino are encouraged to bring with them a small stone that is reflective of the geography of their homeland and carry it in their pocket as they walk, palming it often in their hand. At some point along the Camino one is encouraged to leave the stone somewhere, perhaps on a pillar marker, an altar, at the base of a cross. The stone symbolizes the prayer offered for someone and the offering of the stone marks the surrendering of that someone to God's care and keeping.

I carried two stone hearts in my pocket as well as a small, single earring that belonged to my mother and that I carried in her memory. It was a Christmas candy cane tied with a green bow that was in my Mom's jewelry box. Because the third anniversary of my Mom's death would fall on the sixth day of my Camino journey I had planned to leave it somewhere in remembrance of her life and her love. When that day came I couldn't part with it.

Several days later we took a moment to rest in a small stone carved church in a hillside village. On a side altar there was a beautiful sculpture of Mother Mary with a child in her arms, surrounded by a half a dozen of white vases filled with pink roses. As pink roses were my mother's favorite flower, I felt drawn to the altar and with a whispered prayer of gratitude for my Mom I dropped the little earring into the vase.

Upon closer inspection, I discovered that the roses were actually silk flowers. To my delight that meant that it would a long while before the roses would be removed from these vases, and that my Mom's little Christmas earring could rest at the Mother Mary's altar for months perhaps years. With this in heart and mind, gentle, healing tears began to flow and an inner peace flooded my soul. I then continued on my Camino journey a little lighter on my feet, with my heart a little more healed.

SACRED MOMENTS

There were so many sacred moments like this on my Camino walk. There are many stories that Terry Swehla, my friend and walking partner, could tell you. As I reflect back on it I am grateful for the sacred I encountered in the beauty of fog and mist, forest and sky, river and wildflower. I am grateful for the heightened awareness of God's love and presence I had with every step I took, every candle I lit, and every chapel where I sat to pray.

I am grateful for seeing the Risen Lord in the faces of villagers who offered us gracious hospitality and in the faces of other pilgrims from all around the world – Australia, South Africa, Brazil, South Korea, Ireland, and more. One of the more wonderful traditions of the Camino is a greeting that pilgrims offer to one another as they walk past one another. We turn and say to each other, "Buen Camino" – have a good way.

Dear friends in Christ, you may not be called to go on a spiritual pilgrimage, to walk an ancient spiritual path, but each of you is on a sacred journey. You are pilgrims on a journey of faith. The One on the road with you, the very Spirit of Jesus, is the source of all that you need for walking and living by faith in this world of ours. So may Christ's hope, healing, comfort, courage, peace, and yes, strength, be yours this day and always.

I say to each of you: "On your sacred journey, Buen Camino, have a good way!" Amen.



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