

March 5, 2023
The Second Sunday in Lent
Year A
Genesis 12:1-4a
John 3:1-17
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Pilgrimage

I have been on two official pilgrimages in my life. One was to Israel and Palestine. I went there to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, to see the sites where the events of his life either took place or are commemorated and to see the places where so many other figures from the Bible walked, and lived, and died, and encountered God in so many different ways. I went there to see how God is worshiped there today, in a place where the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob has been worshiped for thousands of years. I went to join my prayers to the prayers of the millions who have walked and prayed in those ancient mountains and valleys and deserts and towns and cities for so many years.

The other pilgrimage I have been on was to northern England, to an island called, the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, where a monk named Aidan, helped to keep Christianity alive in the British Isles at a small monastery in the North Sea after the fall of the Roman Empire. That pilgrimage also took me to a cathedral in the city of Durham, where another saint, Saint Cuthbert, helped his band of monks, from the monastery that Aidan founded, escape from marauders who destroyed their monastery, but who were not able to destroy their community or their faith.

In some ways both of these pilgrimages looked like ordinary travel with suitcases and plane trips and currency exchanges and hotel stays and packing and repacking and being moved by bus from place to place and sightseeing and taking pictures and eating in restaurants.

But in so many other ways, those experiences were anything but ordinary travel. Because I were there for different reasons than the reasons other people travel. I was there

for the express purpose of getting closer to God and in some ways also closer to those who have worshiped God in the past.

I ran into the word “pilgrimage” in a strange way this week. As some of you probably know, our friend, Greta Carlson, a member of Emmanuel, died on Friday, February 24th. Her family is planning a public celebration of life for her sometime in the near future, but they decided to have a very small private burial service for her last Friday. I presided at that service and when I read the first prayer of the funeral service at Greta’s graveside a strange thing happened. These are the words I said:

O God of grace and glory,

we remember our loved one before you today.

We thank you for giving her to us to know and to love in our pilgrimage on earth.

Of course, I’ve said those words many, many times, at many people’s funerals, but when I said them last Friday, I ended up having one of those moments when my brain was doing two things at once. With my mouth I was continuing the prayer, but with the rest of my mind I was thinking about that word, “pilgrimage”. I wondered what was meant by it in a funeral prayer, to say that our life on earth is a pilgrimage. I was struck by the image and distracted by it until I realized that I needed to focus again, to be fully present in the moment of the prayer I was praying and the service I was presiding over. So, I filed the word pilgrimage away in my mind and continued with the service.

Of course, this week was not the first time I’ve run into the opening funeral prayer. While it is one of a couple of opening prayers that I could choose from, it’s my favorite, and the one that I pray at almost every funeral or memorial service that I lead. The word “pilgrimage” has always been there. I’m not sure what made it jump out at me this time, but it certainly did.

It's possible, I guess that it stood out for me because it's Lent. Many times, the season of Lent is called our "Lenten Pilgrimage".

In the last few years, the word "pilgrimage" has appeared in our Lenten liturgy. This past Ash Wednesday it was part of our prayers of intercession. We prayed:

O Lord, our God, you gather your church and call us to return to you. Accompany us throughout our Lenten pilgrimage. Create in us clean hearts and renew all the baptized to declare your praise.

A couple of years ago "pilgrimage" was part of the invocation at the beginning of our Lenten worship services:

In the name of God,
who makes a way in the wilderness,
walks with us,
and guides us in our pilgrimage.

And for many years "pilgrimage" was part of our post-communion prayer:

Compassionate God,
you have fed us with the bread of heaven.
Sustain us in our Lenten pilgrimage:
may our fasting be hunger for justice,
our alms, a making of peace,
and our prayer, the song of grateful hearts...

The idea of Lent being a pilgrimage is a long standing one. As we do when we go on a physical pilgrimage, we enter the season of Lent with the intention of growing closer to God, of sharpening our focus on God's presence in our lives and in the world, and of joining our prayers to the prayers of others who have worshiped God and interceded before God for the world in the past two millennia.

Maybe it's strange to think of Abram and Sarai's journey as a pilgrimage but in some ways, I do think of it that way. God came to Abram and said,

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3).

After those words in our first reading for today, the next words in the reading, from chapter 12 of Genesis are: So, Abram went (Genesis 12:4a).

That means that Abram and Sarai got all packed up, their household goods, their servants, their flocks and herds, all of the things that they possessed and they left their home, their family, and all that they had ever known and they went.

And one has to wonder why they did it. Why did they just take off, in face of God's big demand and ambiguous promise?

I have to wonder if they went, not so much out of a desire to be obedient, or even out of a desire to get what God had promised, but for the same reason that other people have gone on pilgrimages throughout the centuries; because they wanted to know God better. They took God's invitation to enter the wilderness, to go, to travel, because they wanted to know this strange God who spoke out of the silence, who made a big ask and an even bigger promise. Once Abram had had this one encounter with God, he wanted to know this God more, to see what the God who spoke to him directly could and would do with his life, if he followed him into the wilderness.

There was no big trip for Nicodemus, of course, who spoke to Jesus by night in our gospel reading. He was a religious person, who already probably felt pretty connected to God. He was a pharisee, an expert in Jewish law. But somehow, he still knew that he had more to learn. So, he found Jesus, not having travel to some faraway place, but, from the

sound of it, when Jesus was there in his own town. Still, he traveled outside of his comfort zone to talk to Jesus.

I think that there's a reason that Nicodemus went to Jesus by night. Nicodemus was supposed to be an expert in religious things, not still seeking answers. What would his fellow pharisees have thought, what would the people who looked to him for answers have thought if they knew that he had gone to the strange and controversial new rabbi, to get his take on things?

Nicodemus put his reputation on the line going to Jesus and questioning him. Maybe he did it under the cover of darkness to avoid people's questions, people's judgements about why he did it.

He wanted to grow closer to God and he saw God in Jesus. So he went for the same reasons that people across history have gone on pilgrimage, to question and learn and to feel a deeper and more meaningful relationship to God.

Abram and Sarai's story tell us that pilgrimages can turn your whole life upside down. Nicodemus's story tells us that pilgrimages can be very close to home, a conversation under the cover of darkness, where against all odds, you encounter the presence of God and the love of God.

Of course, the funeral prayer that is prayed at almost every funeral I lead tells us something different. It tells us that our whole lives are a pilgrimage. It tells us that in our lives, we are wanderers, far from home, but we are not lost, we are seeking and we are sought. In our pilgrimage on earth, we are called to do what all pilgrims are called to do, to seek the presence of God, to see signs of God's presence, to grow in our understanding of God and our relationship with God. To have those glimpses of God that create in us more and more of a desire to experience the fullness of God. In our pilgrimage of life, we are invited to pray with the saints, to share stories of how we have seen the Lord, and to trust in God's presence in this pilgrimage of life.

We call this season a pilgrimage, but in reality, our whole lives are a pilgrimage, until we are called home, to see God face to face and to celebrate with Nicodemus, who basks in the light of God, and Abraham and Sarah, who are finally at home, and with all of the pilgrims who have gone before us, whose footsteps we have followed, in our pilgrimage of life. Amen.