

## Pilgrimage

Mark 1: 9-15

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Have you thought about going on a pilgrimage?

This week I facilitated a church book club where we discussed the book *Chasing Francis*. It is the story of a pastor of a large church who has a very public crisis of faith. It turns out that the death of one of the children of the church, a six-year-old girl, has prompted his doubts. His stock answers about God and how God works just don't seem to ring true anymore. When he goes off script in a Sunday sermon, putting his doubts and questions on display, there is trouble in River City.

As a result, church leadership puts the pastor on a leave of absence. And the pastor ends up in Italy on a pilgrimage. Turns out he is chasing the spiritual icon, Francis of Assisi, a twelfth century unconventional figure who went from being a wealthy warrior soldier to a devout and eccentric follower of Jesus. Francis tried to live as Jesus lived, which attracted others to him, turning into a movement that was important for the church of its day. That movement became the *Franciscan Order*, and that monastic order has been made more popular today (even among Protestants) because the present Pope is a Franciscan, and chose the name of Pope Francis.

The minister sorts through his crisis of faith by placing himself in the places where Francis lived and ministered. Around Assisi he visits villages, chapels, churches and caves where Francis once walked. In essence, he takes a pilgrimage.

Do you know about pilgrimages? A pilgrimage is a journey made to some sacred place as an act of spiritual devotion. Behind a pilgrimage is a belief or at least a hope that being in a particular place will have spiritual power. For Christians, it could be visiting Jerusalem and sitting among two thousand year old olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed after Last Supper; or standing on the hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee where Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount and fed the five thousand with a few loaves and fish.

Several years ago I lead a group of First Presbyterians to Italy... and in Rome we spent a special Sunday following in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul. Walking in those places where

tradition says Paul could have lived, taught, written and prayed was special and meaningful and spiritually important.

A pilgrimage seeks a deeper connection with God using a place as the medium. Christians have been going on pilgrimages for centuries. But, we Protestants have been reluctant to embrace the idea that a place could hold holy power.

This Wednesday we began Lent with ash crosses marked on our foreheads. That practice has prompted my thinking about a Lenten pilgrimage. We are traveling to a sacred place this Lent... the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning. But I love the saying, "The *journey* is the destination." We have miles to go before we arrive at the empty tomb. I am inviting you to turn Lent into a pilgrimage by allowing the journey to be the sacred destination. Will you come along?

## I

This morning's gospel lesson from Mark is the beginning of a pilgrimage for Jesus. Gospel writer Mark (in his rapid fire style) shows how the pilgrimage begins.

In six verses, Mark reveals that first, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, during which he receives God's blessings and confirmation. Then Jesus is driven into the wilderness for forty days where he confronts demons and beasts...and then Jesus emerges to launch his ministry by proclaiming the Good News that the kingdom of God is at hand!

Baptism. Wilderness. Launch.

Now we often wonder why Jesus was baptized. As John the Baptist would say in so many words, "He needs to be baptizing me; not me him."

But it seems apparent that baptism was the important and symbolic beginning of Jesus' ministry. Baptism is the first public step to what will be three years of teaching, preaching, healing, ministering and leading.

And when Jesus is baptized, God's Spirit descends on him with a voice: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

What is this? This is affirmation from God the Father. Jesus is loved. God is well pleased.

And this is confirmation that God is with him and is one hundred percent behind him, as he begins his earthly ministry.

There is nothing like the power of being affirmed by our father or mother. When I was a kid, my dad would say things to me, “You are going to break many a girl’s heart,” which I knew was stupid and ridiculous. Or when I was a teenage baseball pitcher and we were playing a team that was a lot better than we were, he said to me the morning of the game. “They put their pants on the same way you do.” Which was his way of saying, “They are not better than you.”

Affirmation, words that we are loved, that they are in our corner, that they are our biggest cheerleader, are words that are critically important... especially when the wheels come off and they always do. Right?

This morning we baptized Jones and Brooke and in the Rejoice service siblings Garnet and Melody are being baptized. In essence, with the symbol of water, God claims us. God claims our children. God is in our corner and we are God’s loved and beloved.

When the reformer, Martin Luther, would get discouraged, he would put his hand on his head and say, “I am a baptized child of God.” He was reminding himself that God had his back. That he was loved and beloved.

The affirmation of God, symbolized in baptism, launches the ministry, the journey, of Jesus.

## II

But the very first stop on the journey is, well, an odd one. Rather than a champagne breakfast by the Sea of Galilee to commemorate the launching of the most important spiritual campaign in human history, Mark says that the same Spirit who was present at baptism drove Jesus into the wilderness for forty days where he was tempted by Satan and where he encountered wild beasts.

Now we don’t know if Mark might have been using powerful metaphors here. And we know from the other gospel renditions of the wilderness temptations that Jesus was being tested to see what kind of ministry he was to lead and what kind of Messiah he was going to be. Was his ministry political, humanitarian, populist, or something else?

You and I know temptation is real... regardless of the source or how temptation occurs. My guess is that we can all tell stories of how we have been tempted and are still being tempted both in small ways and in ways that have huge consequences for our lives and for those around us.

How do we deal with or survive those temptations? Part, maybe most of the answer we find in this text.

The baptism of Jesus was also about Jesus establishing his identity. He was the beloved, affirmed, son of God. This is to say, that when Jesus is flung into the wilderness of temptation, trying to discover what kind of ministry he is to lead, and what kind of Messiah he is to be, he draws on his baptismal experience of identity and affirmation to get clarity so that he does not become something he is not.

How many times have you told your children, especially your teenage children, “Remember who you are and where you come from.”

There is a sense about words like that remind us that we come from a family that stands for certain things and has certain values.

Not that we always can live up to that. I mean, we are human beings, flawed and vulnerable. And remember, we are not defined by our worst moments or poorest decisions. And sometimes the way we recover from failure and wrong choices is by remembering both who we are and Whose we are.

“I’m in your corner,” says God. “You are my beloved. You think you are the only one in the world who has messed up. Repent. Believe the Good News. Get on the road to Jerusalem.”

### III

And it is that road to Jerusalem and toward the empty tomb that I am inviting you to travel.

Let’s make Lent meaningful! Let’s make this pilgrimage a sacred place. We have roughly forty days to make the journey, the destination, the Empty Tomb.

How will you and I do it? By being intentional.

Traditionally, a lot of Christians have used Lent to give up something. Food is popular. Giving up meat, or alcohol, or desserts. I knew a guy who every Lent gave up smoking cigarettes. Boy was he glad to see Easter!

Now I hear folks giving up television or Facebook or their devices in the evening.

The purpose of giving up something should be that those things hinder our relationship with God or God's people...or that by giving them up, we are experiencing the sacrifice of Christ in some small way.

But I for one, am less a giver upper (though I have) and more an adding to-er. If the purpose of Lent is to get me spiritually ready for Easter, I want to add something that enables me to be a deeper spiritual person and a better follower of Jesus.

So think about a Lenten task that for instance helps others. What would that be? Or how about a commitment to daily prayer for at least five minutes or learning some new ways to pray? Or reading the Gospel of Mark which will take you between two to three hours max, hardly undoable divided over forty days. Or learn the spiritual practice of reading and praying the scripture called, *Lectio Divina*. Or commit to attending our thirty minute Contemplative Service each Wednesday night during Lent. It's a service where prayer, silence, music and scripture allows us to rest in God.

But this past Wednesday changed how I was thinking about Lent. On Wednesday we again experienced a horrific mass shooting in our country. This time in Parkland Florida. Fourteen high schoolers dead. Three teachers. The gunman, a nineteen year old former student, who took a semiautomatic weapon and gunned down his classmates.

Horrible, tragic and senseless. It is every parent's and grandparent's nightmare. And now of course kids all over this country are anxious and fearful that one day their school will be the target.

And who can blame them after Columbine, Virginia Tech, Newtown, and ten other school shootings in this century where at least five students have been shot and killed. And I am just talking about school shootings, not Orlando or Las Vegas, or the Texas church shooting when twenty-six people were killed.

Since Wednesday, several people have expressed to me not only their sadness but their mounting frustration that we in this country cannot or will not do the necessary things to stop this madness. They want to know what they can do. So do I.

I have lots of questions about why we can buy semiautomatic weapons, or where mental health comes in on this, where the line is drawn between our individual rights and what is best and right for our country's health and wellbeing.

So during Lent my pilgrimage will include praying about gun violence in our country. I will pray for those families who have lost their beloved children and for the families in Florida of teachers who lost their husbands, fathers, and brothers.

And I will pray for the people who are trying to make a difference, who are seeking ways to find a way around people, organizations and institutions who for whatever reason are not helping us solve this destructive problem.

I will pray that good people can find a way and that way will become obvious to us who believe this must stop.

My pilgrimage will include learning. During Lent I will be reading position papers, studies and statements from churches and theologians on guns and gun violence and seeking Bible studies that focus on this issue. Because for me, as a Christian, and as a pastor, your pastor, I don't really care about opinions or about the politics; I care about what it means to be a Christian in this debate and what my faith, our faith, would lead us to think and do. What would Jesus do?

If you want to join me in my pilgrimage, I am beginning a Lenten blog that will appear on our webpage today or tomorrow.

So my Lenten pilgrimage will include praying, learning... thinking and doing. Because the words of Martin Luther King are my great reminder: "For evil to succeed, all it needs is for good people to do nothing."

I invite you to turn this Lent into a pilgrimage. Where the journey IS the destination.