

HOW CAN WE KNOW THE WAY?

The Park Church

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The gospel passage that Rob read earlier is part of Jesus' Farewell Discourse to his disciples before he was crucified. In this passage, Jesus uses enigmatic words to describe where he is going and why he needs to leave the world. He promises that he will bring those who love him to be with him in this place to which he is going. And then he says, *And you know the way to the place where I am going*. Now Thomas, who is my favorite disciple because he asks the questions we all want to ask but are a little afraid, says, *Lord, we do not know the way you are going. How can we know the way?* This question states the obvious, but Jesus is not operating on that level. He replies, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life*. I can only imagine that this response must have left Thomas and the other disciples standing there feeling doubtful and anxious. We too are often perplexed by these words. How is Jesus the way? How do we become followers of the way as the earliest Christians were known?

I would like to talk with you today about pilgrimage as one way of following the path that Jesus walked. Throughout the centuries, it has served as a form of worship, a means of finding the sacred in life and of discovering something new about ourselves and our relationship with God. I will be sharing with you my recent experience of going on a pilgrimage in Wales. And I will invite you to reflect on pilgrimages you have made or would like to make in your life.

First, we need to understand what *pilgrimage* means. I'm wondering what one word or short phrase immediately comes into your mind when you hear the word *pilgrimage*? All of these images are valuable aspects of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage has been described by one author as *a powerful metaphor for any journey with the purpose of finding something that matters deeply to the traveler*. Another author calls pilgrimage *a transformative journey to a sacred center* (Cousineau, xxiii). The word itself is derived from the Latin *peregrinus* – from *per* meaning “through” and *ager* meaning “field” or “land.” So a pilgrim is *someone who travels beyond his or her known territory [literally crossing fields] on a journey to new places, landscapes, [and] awarenesses* (Sellner, 26). Pilgrims, says Richard R. Niebuhr, *are persons in motion – passing through territories not their own – seeking something we might call completion or...clarity..., a goal to which only the spirit's compass points the way*. In essence, pilgrims are people who are seeking the way to greater wholeness, wisdom, and peace.

Any journey can become a pilgrimage if the traveler is open, attentive, responsive, and committed to finding something personally sacred along the road. Obstacles, as we all know, are inevitable. It turns out that the word *travel* derives from the older word *travail*, which is rooted in a Latin word meaning a medieval torture rack. Unlike the problems that occur in other forms of travel, the ordeals encountered on a pilgrimage are seen as a way to learn something about ourselves and the world around us rather as a form of torment. They become the stepping stones to greater trust and dependence on God rather than on ourselves. One traveling author was told by a Buddhist priest that “the point of pilgrimage is to improve yourself by enduring and overcoming difficulties.” In other words, a soulful journey “will be rigorous.” “The sacred... evokes [both] emotion and commotion” (Cousineau, xxvii).

The earliest recorded pilgrimage was Abraham’s journey to the promised land some 4,000 years ago. It began with a call. We read in Genesis, chapter 12, that *...the Lord said to Abram, “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.* Abram responded to that call by obeying the Lord. Years later, when the Israelites made an annual pilgrimage to the central sanctuary to bring the first fruits of the harvest and to thank God for the land’s bounty, they recounted the story of Abraham’s journey, the Exodus from Egypt, and the journey to the land that God had promised them. This beautiful liturgy of thanksgiving, which is found in the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy, begins with the words, *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous...* We see in these words how the story of pilgrimage is deeply embedded in the faith that guides us to this day. Always, it is God who leads the way.

Pilgrimages often happen in stages. In the beginning, there is some form of dissatisfaction, desire, or longing that is followed by a call. If one hears and responds to the call, there is a point of departure, the crossing of a threshold, and then the actual path of the pilgrim with all of its unexpected twists and turns. Along the way, helpers and guides step forth to assist us. Finally, we arrive at our destination and experience its blessings and challenges. But the journey is not over until we return with all that we have learned and share it with others.

My own journey did not begin as a pilgrimage. I had planned to visit my brother in England and then join a guided group to do some hiking and sight-seeing in different parts of Wales. The group fell through because not enough people

registered for it, but I still wanted to visit Wales. The Celtic tradition which is found throughout this country and the great beauty of the land and sea was compelling for me. In my research, I read about a medieval pilgrimage path along the Llyn Peninsula in northern Wales. It started in a town called Clynnog Fawr where pilgrims congregated at the church of St. Bueno to receive prayers and blessings before starting their journey. The pilgrimage took them to the tip of the peninsula and across a treacherous body of water to the remote and sacred island of Bardsey. It was believed that the completion of this pilgrimage gained atonement for sins that had been committed and lessened the time the pilgrim would spend in purgatory before entering heaven. In the Middle Ages, the pope declared that three pilgrimages to Bardsey were equal to one pilgrimage to Rome. Bardsey Island is sometimes known as the Isle of 20,000 saints because many pilgrims, believing that the island was “the very porch of heaven,” went there to die. Gradually, it became apparent to me that following this same path would give me an opportunity to make a pilgrimage, not as a way of bypassing purgatory or atoning for my sins, but for the purpose of intentionally seeking clarity about aspects of my life and opening myself to divine guidance. I also realized that it would be a test of my heart – a physical test because I had not long ago been treated for a serious heart arrhythmia which made it impossible for me to climb even the smallest of hills, and a spiritual test of my ability to trust and to be grateful for whatever and whoever came my way.

The question was how to make such a journey. An internet search came up with a local company which basically consisted of the owner and a young man named Simon, whose job it was to describe each day’s journey, to set me on the path, to pick me up when I had completed a day’s walking, and to take me to my lodgings for the night. I e-mailed him in advance that I would be willing to cover about 10 miles a day and immediately started training. When I arrived in Wales, I was given maps, a GPS (which resembled a hand-held compass), and Simon’s cell phone. It turned out that the GPS didn’t always work very well and once the batteries gave out completely. The maps did not show the multiplicity of paths that actually exist thanks to the thousands of sheep that wander the hills, and the phone was only helpful if Simon was in the office or at his home. Unlike the group tour I had originally envisioned, I would travel alone, meeting an occasional walker like myself and, on rare occasions, a group of walkers, but otherwise keeping company with the sea, the land, the sky, and the ever-present sheep. I quickly realized that this journey would involve more than putting one foot in front of the other and enjoying the scenery along the way. Loneliness, self-doubt, fear, and fatigue were frequent visitors. I found myself walking that fine line between the known and the unknown, between security and vulnerability. In the midst of it all, I also

discovered, in surprising and unexpected ways, that God was with me. At times, I felt pure joy, at one with myself and the beauty around me, excited and hopeful about the path that lay ahead.

My first day of walking taught me lessons that would be repeated many times during the next six days. I began the day with a visit to St. Bueno's church where pilgrims in the Middle Ages gathered to begin their journey toward the sacred island of Bardsey. No one was in the church, but I felt the supportive prayers of friends and family and of the generations of people who had gone before me. To these prayers, I added my own in the words of Psalm 56 – *I will put my trust in you, O God, I will praise you for your Presence, I will trust and not be afraid.*

It had rained the day before, but the sky was clearing as I started up the road above the church. The road soon became a dirt path that led steadily upward. Each turn in the path gave me a broader view of the tiny village below, the blue expanse of sea stretching out in the distance, and the hills, pastures, and farms that made up the terrain I was entering. My spirit soared at the sight of such beauty. Everything was a source of wonder! I stopped to admire flocks of sheep, colorful wildflowers, and interesting rock formations. For quite awhile, the path climbed gradually, but things became much more challenging when the GPS indicated that I needed to go up a very steep hill with no clearly marked path. This took an enormous amount of physical energy as well as determination mixed with anxiety about losing my way. I actually climbed quite a ways up the hill, but then decided I must be in the wrong place and went down and then up again, only to arrive at exactly the same place I had come to before. The first time, I did not see the gate I needed to pass through but, on the second try, it seemed to appear out of nowhere.

Eventually, I came to the top of the ridge, climbed over a stone wall, and entered some beautiful sloping moors. Now the sun was shining and the bright yellow of the gorse and the deep purple of the heather again lifted my spirit. I made my way through a pass between the hills and began to descend toward a small town by the sea. When I reached the beach, I took off my boots and waded in the cold water. I felt such a sense of accomplishment in having figured out how to get to this point, but it was getting late and I knew I still had to find the place where Simon was waiting for me.

It was then that I experienced another aspect of pilgrimage which deeply affected the meaning of this journey for me. I was very hot and tired after walking over 13 miles and had little water left. It turned out that the remainder of the journey was a long distance up a steep hill. No matter how many different ways I tried to move

in that direction, the needle on the GPS compass kept swinging back and forth with no clear resolution. Not only was I confused about how to get there, I knew I didn't have the strength to make it and there was no way to contact Simon because he had already left the office. In the midst of this quandary, I saw a couple approaching and decided to explain my situation and see whether they might have some idea about what to do. It turned out that they were a very nice English man and woman who, like me, had spent the day walking. They were planning to take a small bus (the last bus of the day) back to their car and offered, not only to pay my bus fare (because I had no money with me), but then to drive me to the place where Simon was waiting. I accepted their offer and we had a delightful conversation, arriving only a half hour past the agreed upon meeting time.

It became apparent to me over the following days that the way – in the form of a path or a gate or the people who rescued me – was always there. I just couldn't see it. My self-doubt and fear and my inability to read the landscape that was right in front of me prevented me from recognizing the way. Again and again, I had this astonishing realization that, in spite of my discouragement and disbelief, the gate would appear and allow me to enter into the next phase of my journey. I was reminded too that there wasn't always just one right path. My narrow-minded way of thinking convinced me that only one path would lead me to my destination. I would waste time and energy retracing my steps in an effort to figure it out, but in reality, I could have taken any of several paths. God gives us generous opportunities to find our way if we can trust what lies beyond our limited vision. Even the wrong paths that lead us far from our true selves can open doors that lead us back home.

I did finally reach Bardsey Island, but that is a story for another time. I'm wondering whether anyone would like to share an experience of pilgrimage you have had in your life..... Thank you for sharing your experiences.

I would like to end with Thomas' question, *How can we know the way?* Often throughout my pilgrimage, I just wanted a voice to tell me which way to go, to say "Debbie, turn here. This is the right path, the right choice." And so it is in life – we wonder whether to take this job, to be in this relationship, to stay in this house or move to another, and numerous other large and small decisions we have to make daily. When Jesus says, *I am the way*, he is not giving specific directions for our lives. It is his relationship with the Father that enables him to recognize and stay true to his calling. We too can know the way when we let go of the fears that obscure the path. Pilgrimage helps us to face those fears for what they are and to

see what lies behind and beyond them. It is a way of deepening our faith and trust in the One who is our true guide.

When pilgrims return to their once familiar surroundings, they often recognize how much they originally missed and took for granted. The joys and trials of their journeys have expanded their sense of who they are and what they are meant to be and do in the world. T.S. Eliot expresses this beautifully in his poem, "Little Giddings," when he writes:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

May God be with you in all of your inward and outward explorations.
Amen.