

Life is a Pilgrimage
Sermon by W. Dreyman
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Holy Trinity, Hasbrouck Heights

We often talk about Lent as a season of pilgrimage. We journey from ashes to Easter. That is, from the burden of our mortality that we recount on Ash Wednesday to God's promise of resurrection life that the church remembers during the Easter season. We engage in a pilgrimage from injury to healing; from hunger to the banquet table; from brokenness to unity; from death to life because we see this journey in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. But, this pilgrimage, remembered each Lent, is a journey of more than 40 days. It is a journey of life: a life-long journey.

The Hebrew people in the passage from the Book of Numbers were on a pilgrimage. They were journeying from slavery under Pharaoh to freedom in the Promised Land. There was no food and water. It was a life and death struggle in the harshness of the desert, so when the people began murmuring against God and Moses, it was a challenge with grievous consequences. Then, things got worse. Poisonous serpents began to bite the people and many of them died. Remarkably, the people did not interpret this as one more reason to quit the pilgrimage and go back to

Pharaoh. They experienced this as a sign from God. Moses prayed over them, and, according to God's direction made a bronze serpent, which stood as a sign of healing before the people. The people were reunited in their praise of God and their allegiance to Moses: at least for a little while.

Yesterday was St. Patrick's Day. Patrick had been taken at age 16 from his community in southwest Britain by Irish pirates and sold into slavery. Six years later, he escaped and made a pilgrimage from slavery in Ireland back to freedom. This experience had reawakened his faith. He became a bishop and returned to Ireland, this time not as a slave but as a missionary. According to his autobiography, he denounced the slave trade. But, there is doubt about this saint and what he accomplished. About Patrick, author Jim Taylor writes:

There may never have been a St. Patrick. Or there may have been several of them. One of the Patricks certainly left us two letters, containing some details of his life. He was born to a Christian family in Wales, captured and taken to Ireland as a slave. After six years, he escaped, returned home, and eventually went back to Ireland as a missionary. He may have written one letter – his Declaration or Confession – to defend himself in a trial instigated by the victim of his other letter, a tirade against someone called Coroticus.

A second Patrick – Palladius in Latin – was sent to Ireland by Pope Celestine as a bishop. (Taylor continues:)

Both lived in the 5th century A.D. But there their similarities end.

One Patrick wrote rustic Latin; the other, polished Latin. One evangelized and baptized thousands of pagan Irish; the other serviced existing Christian

communities. One worked in Ireland's wilder west and north; the other mainly in the royal cities along the Irish Sea.

In all probability, neither of them threw all the snakes out of Ireland. A total absence of fossils suggests that Ireland never had any snakes to banish. And the shamrock Patrick supposedly used illustrate the Trinity was already a common symbol of pre-Christian Druids. (He concludes:)

One of these Patricks died on March 17 and was buried under a large slab of rock in Downpatrick, in one of the most Protestant counties of Northern Ireland. But no one knows for sure which one.¹

There may be confusion about this fifth century saint, but the little that is known about him suggests that his experience of slavery and his pilgrimage to freedom had a profound effect on Ireland and later throughout the church. It brings some sadness to see the way he is remembered in our communities today. Does dyeing beer green have anything to do with the memory of this man, of his pilgrimage, and the thousands of baptisms he is reported to have performed?

Jim Taylor went on a pilgrimage in Ireland. He travelled to Mount Brendan, a place for many hikers and sojourners. As he plodded up a muddy slope along one of those traditional paths, avoiding prickly evergreen shrubs and sheep droppings, he suddenly realized that the academic research didn't matter. Instead, he found himself thinking about the thousands of people whose feet

¹ Jim Taylor is a Canadian author of 16 books, and writes a blog at edges.canadahomepage.net/2012/03/ where this passage was found.

had travelled this trail before him. At one point, the trail snaked above a precipice plunging to a tiny village far below.

“I don’t think I can go on,” said Mary from Los Angeles. She was terrified of heights, she admitted – afraid to go higher, afraid of having to creep back down on her own.

“I’ll stay with you,” he offered. “If you have to go down, I’ll go with you.”

Twenty minutes later, Mary stood triumphantly on the peak. Jim congratulated her.

“It’s funny,” she replied. “As soon as you promised you wouldn’t abandon me, I wasn’t afraid any more.”

Perhaps that’s the whole point of going on a pilgrimage – indeed, of treating life like a pilgrimage. It’s about discovering that we are not alone. Even if you travel solo, you have company. All who have gone that way before accompany you.²

² Ibid.

In this morning's Gospel we have Jesus in conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. As you may remember Nicodemus had come to Jesus under the cover of night, so we see how difficult the ministry had become after Jesus cast out the moneychangers from the Temple. To Nicodemus' question: "How can these things be?" Jesus lifts up the story of Moses and the Hebrew pilgrimage from slavery to freedom. "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." (John 3:14-15) Jesus uses the story of the Exodus to make the point that his presence saves the people from death just as the bronze serpent at the hand of Moses did long before. Now the people were no longer enslaved by Pharaoh, but they were still prisoners of the desire to be like God. This was the great barrier to God and the gift of eternal life God promised. The lifting-up of Jesus on the cross, the lifting-up of Christ from the tomb, and the lifting-up of the Savior to a place beside God are what enables the Holy One to say enough is enough! Even death cannot overcome my life! The gap between God's life and ours has been closed. The distance between God's love and ours has been brought together. And, the space between the Lord's Day and the rest of the week has been diminished.

What do I mean by saying that the space between the Lord's Day and the rest of the week has been diminished? I mean that the Savior knows us and seeks to be known in your homes, workplaces, schools, training centers and even in your retirement. It is no longer possible to compartmentalize our lives by keeping our faith limited to our Sunday experience or church-related activities. God is a God of the world and God abides in every nook and cranny of our existence. He is the God of creation, making a home in the universe, but God also has a home in our hearts, our actions, and our feelings. You cannot say, as one woman did, "one of my children is in business. The other is serving the Lord in ministry." God calls each of us to express our baptismal identity in whatever we do, wherever we live. Remember what Mary from Los Angeles said to Jim Taylor: "As soon as you promised you wouldn't abandon me, I wasn't afraid anymore." It is comforting to know that God's love is all around us, supporting us in the midst of challenges.

But, here is the less comfortable part. If God is in the world, then the chief place of mission is not within the four walls of this congregation, but out in the world where God abides. I will say

more about this in a future sermon, but let me conclude with a story: Dawn is a secretary to the postmaster of a large, regional post office. She was asked, “Does being a Christian make a difference in your work and in your relationships with the people you meet at work?”³ She replied,

Yes, it does, because in the morning I pray and I ask God to get me through the day, because I know I need that. The main thing I ask for all the time is wisdom to get through the day, even the little daily things, just to make the right decisions or just to guide me on how far I can take this. I think that if I didn't truly believe that, there'd be no way I could handle it. There's some kind of inner peace I get from that or there's some kind of intervention that gives me input there.⁴

Dawn is on a pilgrimage of life in which she seeks to live out her baptism. Through that journey, she discovers inner peace. For Dawn, life *is* a pilgrimage. Through it, she has experienced that great truth: we are never alone. Amen.

³ from Listen! God is calling, by D. Michael Bennethum.

⁴ Ibid.