

"THE CALL TO PILGRIMAGE"

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Scene One: I am fifteen years old. I belong to a Lutheran church. I worship there virtually every Sunday morning. I sing in the Youth Choir. It's my first year in the High School Youth Group, and I love it. Early in February of that year, Pastor Shaheen, the Senior Minister, comes to talk to our youth group about Lent and about what a faithful believer (those were his words) is called to do during this holy season. We are to come to the Chapel on Ash Wednesday, with our families, to receive the ashes. You can come anytime from 7am to 9pm and one of the ministers will be there to put the ashes on your forehead and direct you in prayer. Every hour on the hour, there is the opportunity to take Communion. Then, as high schoolers, we are urged (which in that church is very close to being required) to come to the six weeks of Lenten Wednesday morning breakfast and Bible study, beginning at 7:00am and ending in time for us to get to school by 8:30. Now this is something of a treat for me, because the kids in my youth group go to four different high schools, so seeing each other, and especially when I could see my boyfriend on a week-day morning, is unusual and fun. While I remember the taste of the oatmeal and the unlimited syrup on the pancakes, as well as all of us standing at the end to say the Lord's Prayer together, I don't remember much of the content of the Bible Study. What is imprinted on me at the time - the significance of the Lenten season as a time for spiritual focus and practice and ritual - has stayed with me throughout my life.

So I stand here today as a believer in Lent, a season set apart from the rest of the year, a season that leads us through the spiritual and personal wildernesses of our own choosing and takes us, if we are faithful to its rhythm, to the renewal and rebirth of Easter. And I stand here today, as one of your pastors, inviting you, for the sake of your soul, to take part in a Lenten Pilgrimage that is specific for you.

To make a Pilgrimage in a holy season is an ancient and common spiritual practice. Jews and Christians visit Jerusalem; Muslims visit Mecca; Buddhists travel to India; Hindus go to the River Ganges. In the 12th century, during the Crusades, travel to Jerusalem was too dangerous, so the Catholic church appointed seven pilgrimage

cathedrals to which pilgrims could travel and then walk the Labyrinths within these cathedrals as their pilgrimage.

Scene two: In 2001, I travel to Scotland. For reasons I can not clearly articulate before I leave, I feel a strong compelling need to go there. Three things happen to me that turn that trip into a personal pilgrimage. On the first day in Scotland, I immediately find a sense of my own ethnic roots and heritage. I knew that I had, way back on my great-grandfather's side some Scottish ancestors, but what a surprise it is to me – the only person in my family who has red hair - to walk down the street in Glasgow and see all these people whose hair is the same color as mine, whose skin has the same tones as mine. I even see a sign in the window of a hair salon that says "Red is beautiful (or *Redheads and Beauty*)."

A few days later, I discover a strong emotional connection with my own Christian roots on the island of Iona. That mystical island, the Abbey and the singing, the ancient Celtic crosses, the sky and sea, and the simple starkness of the worship and the landscape, touch deep parts of my faith. Later still, on the Isle of Lewis, I walk among ancient standing stones, thousands of years old, filled with absolute mystery about who and how and when and why they came to be. And they are, for me, a symbol of my link with past and present and future, with eternity, with humanity, with life and death. The stones are ancient and silence; they have no answers for my verbal, wordy, extroverted self. It is enough to sit on the ground with my back leaning against the stone, watching the full moon rise over the lake and the hills, and know that answers don't always come with words. Sometimes answers are simply moments of presence and sometimes that is who I am as well. It was a moment of spiritual epiphany from which I will never be the same.

A Pilgrimage can be a call to a place, a journey of a long distance in space and time. Even if we can't understand the call or the quest at first, what marks the journey as a pilgrimage is our intention, our willingness to go, and our openness to discovery and to vision. I had no idea that my journey to Scotland would be a pilgrimage, but my intention to go and to be open was never in doubt.

A Pilgrimage can also be a call to an internal journey. And the marker of this journey is the same, it is our intention, our willingness to learn, to seek, to grow, to change, to open ourselves to discovery and to vision.

Intention is the key to beginning the pilgrimage that sets us on the path. It is our practice, it is what we do, that moves our intentions into external and internal action and transformation. Spiritual practice helps us locate the pulse of the holy in our daily lives. Our embodied actions give our spirit its shape.

Scene three:

So here we are, set for our pilgrimage, with intention and openness, with practice and action to ground our journey, and off we go. Pilgrimages come with another guarantee. Somewhere on the journey, somewhere in the baggage you carry with you, the setbacks and demons come along for the ride.

Scene four: On my last sabbatical, I intentionally plan a month of solitude, with Larry as the only person around, in an isolated cabin in the mountains of western North Carolina. It is to be a month to recover a sense of who I am when I am not being a minister. It is to be a month to read and hike, to meditate and write, to watercolor and learn to play the dulcimer, to rest and play. But, of course, when I take myself there, all of myself comes. And there I am, one day, feeling isolated, left out, insecure, uncertain of who I am or what I want to do or even what I want to eat for lunch. I'm flooded with tears, remorse, anger, and all those yucky green demons who've scolded me with negative messages for years – and I have no distractions. I can't go to work, or have lunch with a friend, or paint the kitchen, or take care of my grandchildren. I'm just there, stuck with me. (Besides Larry's suggestion one evening that it might be morally ok to take half a xanax one night) two things get me through. One is an exercise called the Monster Hall of Fame from Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way*, where I list all the monsters and demons that are the building blocks of the negative messages I have about myself. It is a long and interesting list. The second was a

quote by Pema Chodron that I watercolor once a day for a week: "Our demons clearly seen begin to wear themselves out Out out." I have one of those paintings sitting on top of the bookcase in my office right now.

A Pilgrimage, I learned, is not about denial; it is not about escaping all the parts of your life that you don't want to face. In fact, a pilgrimage opens up the space for us to look at those things we avoid and, in giving us the time to see them clearly, we can find a new understanding and healing. Through the difficulties always encountered on a long journey, a pilgrimage offers us the opportunity to develop inner strength, courage and compassion, both for ourselves and for others.

The last piece of the pilgrimage is starting over, starting again. Sooner or later, it happens. We become overly busy, we get diverted by an emergency of some kind, we simply get forgetful or lazy, or our travel arrangements fall through or get delayed. We find ourselves on a side road, or back at square one. We haven't kept to the plan, the schedule or the promises we made to ourselves. What's important to remember is that this too is part of the journey.

Scene five: It's two years ago. I make a commitment to myself on Ash Wednesday that during Lent that I will take a walk each day and practice being in the present moment, ceasing my incessant monkey mind and paying attention to the beauty around me. I do this really well for three weeks. Then I get sick; it turns into pneumonia; the doctor orders me to bed rest for five days and says no exercise of any kind for two weeks.

Whatever I commit to do as a Lenten spiritual practice, I can guarantee that during these six weeks something will come along to derail my intention. I would feel guilty and beat myself up about my unrealistic expectations or I would just give up and let myself off the hook. Lately I've tried to remember what I learned from my mentor in prayer, Flora Wuellner, which I've shared with you before. I am learning to gently laugh at myself when these things happen, to just reach out to myself as I would reach out to a small child who has strayed off the path in the woods, and lightly and tenderly redirect myself back to my intentions, back to my practice. In the case of pneumonia, I

decided that maybe what I really needed to practice for two weeks was learning how to truly rest, so I shifted my practice to accommodate what had happened to me.

So, my friends, here we are. It's the first Sunday of Lent and the invitation is here to you to choose your Lenten Pilgrimage, the path you want to follow this year. What question or issue from your life – what relationship or personal concern – what spiritual practice or learning – do you want to focus on during the next 46 days? It may be wise not to pick the hardest issue in your life, or the most difficult practice, but instead to choose something that you feel able to direct your attention to at this time.

To assist you, there are purple cards that you may pick up in the foyer today where you can write your intention as well as the resources and practices that can assist you in your journey. A number of resources that are available to you here at UCG are also listed on this card. Consider also the resources you have at hand: journaling, walking, yoga, reading, meditating, praying, talking with a spiritual friend or counselor, being mindful of your dreams.

You can also pick up a purple wristband to wear each day to remind you of the pilgrimage you are making. And you can make a commitment to your Lenten journey by taking a stone from the baskets that will be passed around at the end of Communion. Pick a stone, write your name on it, put the pen back in the basket, pass the basket with the pens to the person next to you, and then during the last hymn, place your stone on one of the Taize blocks where you will see it here all during Lent, and where you will see it surrounded by all the other stones from UCG people.

For that is the other thing about pilgrimage – we are not alone. Others are wearing their purple wristbands. Others whose stones are here are on pilgrimage as well. And millions of folks all over the world are participating in Lenten practices and rituals. Barbara Brown Taylor says that “God does not call to us once but many times. There are many calls to faith, and we are not meant to hear them all by ourselves.” That is the heart of what a church is.

