

# Called to be a Pilgrim People

Stephen J. Binz

I have spent a good part of the past twenty years leading pilgrimages to biblical lands: Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, Greece, and Italy. On these journeys I have witnessed countless healings and transformations: renewed faith, easing of painful memories, family reconciliation, contemplative prayer, and alignment of life with the Gospel.

Whatever the circumstances or motivations people have for going on a pilgrimage, their stated reasons at the beginning often turn out to be different from the actual benefits realized at the end. Then, after “unpacking” the experience during the following days, weeks, and months, pilgrims often begin to recognize deeper changes that have occurred within them through the graces of pilgrimage.

A pilgrimage is different from a vacation. After seeing plenty of sights, snapping lots of photos, and catching up on needed rest, a vacationer usually experiences no profound changes. A pilgrim is one whose internal travel parallels the external trip. On a well-planned pilgrimage the interior journey is kept at the forefront of the traveler’s awareness.

The film *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen, portrays and personalizes the pilgrimage to Compostela in Spain. This journey to the tomb of St. James has been walked by millions of people for a thousand years. Sheen plays a father whose son has died in an accident at the beginning of his journey to Compostela. The father—tired, cynical, and grieving—sets off on the ancient way. As he moves along his pilgrim road he meets other pilgrims from around the world, each searching for greater meaning in their lives. By the end of the journey he realizes that he has rediscovered his lost son and even his own lost soul.

In a more recent film, *Wild*, Reese Witherspoon plays a young woman who rashly decides to hike the thousand-mile Pacific Crest Trail alone. After the dissolution of her marriage, the death of her mother, and years of destructive behavior, she begins her trek. Against all odds and driven by sheer determination, she forges ahead on a journey that strengthens and



ultimately heals her. Although her journey is not explicitly religious, it is a genuine pilgrimage because she allows her outward travel to promote an interior journey.

These contemporary films express an ancient human experience. Stories of pilgrimage can be found in the literature of nearly every culture. The Bible is filled with pilgrimage narratives, and pilgrimage is an integral part of the faith experiences of both Israel and the early Christians. On my journeys I have discovered that pilgrimage is characterized by three aspects: it is a universal, communal, and liturgical experience.

## **A Universal Experience**

A desire to go on pilgrimage seems to be rooted in the human DNA. The practice of pilgrimage is one of the great common experiences of humanity. Nearly every culture and creed contains some concept of pilgrimage—a journey to a sacred place for a deeper experience of the transcendent or the divine.

The notion of “thin places,” physical places in which God’s presence is more accessible than elsewhere, comes from Celtic spirituality. Here heaven and earth come close together and the human and divine seem to touch one another. In most ancient traditions, mountains and rivers were such “thin places.” The wise ones of the earth seek such high and wild places, expecting and experiencing there a deep communication between the temporal and the eternal. They then soon discover that even thinner places can be found in the human condition as they encounter the mysteries of suffering, joy, compassion, and love.

As Abraham and Sarah set out from their homeland in ancient Mesopotamia to seek the land to which God was directing them (Gen 12–21), they established the paradigm for biblical pilgrimage. This first act of our salvation history demanded that this couple leave all that seemed predictable and secure in order to travel to a new place where they would encounter God more personally. At the thin places of the land of Canaan our ancestors in faith would enter into covenant with God and erect altars to commemorate their encounters with God.

Those who travel on sacred journeys encounter peoples of every imaginable race and language—all fellow human beings, searching for God, seeking healing and transformation, entering deeply into the mysteries of human life. Especially in the biblical lands of the Middle East—the intersecting points of Asia, Africa, and Europe—I have met monotheistic believers desiring to stand and pray in the places where God has revealed the divine presence and saving power throughout the four thousand years of Jewish and Christian history.

Pilgrim at the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem.

## A Communal Experience

On any pilgrimage those traveling together might include individuals, couples, and friends from many different places and backgrounds. Over the days of their journey these assorted people form a beautiful community of faith. Young and old, single and married, encompassing the full spectrum of language accents and political opinions, these travelers experience a rich unity as they join together in the transcendent experience of pilgrimage.

These pilgrims carry in their hearts those they love—spouses, children, parents, friends, parishes, all united with them in support and prayer.

*Pilgrimage: universal, communal, liturgical.*

These are joined with fellow believers who have come from all parts of the world, united in a common faith and desire to encounter God. This community of pilgrims is then connected with the faithful people of the land itself: those who run hotels, staff churches and shrines, prepare

food, and carry pilgrims through their land as their hosts. Ministers of hospitality and pilgrims together create a joyful and faithful community.

As Moses led the Hebrews out of their bondage in Egypt, God formed them into a covenanted people. It took forty years of travel to shape them into the people of God, ready to live in the land God had promised them. Like the ancient Israelites in the wilderness, pilgrims form community on the journey and are transformed by God into a more faithful and trusting people. On pilgrimage they must learn to trust in God's presence, in the word of God, in the guidance offered by the Holy Spirit. In the process they become more completely the people God made them to be.

## A Liturgical Experience

Sometimes pilgrims will ask me why the sites of biblical events were not left in their natural state. Why is the place of the burning bush now enclosed in an Orthodox monastery? Why is the house of Mary now surrounded by the Basilica of the Annunciation? Why wasn't the cave of Bethlehem preserved in its original state? Why was the empty tomb of Jesus converted into a complex of chapels zealously guarded by six different Christian traditions? Why did the simple tombs of Peter and Paul become the focuses of massive Roman basilicas?

The answer lies at the heart of the Judeo-Christian faith. We remember the events of salvation not just by seeing and touching the site but by liturgical ritual. Our Israelite ancestors erected shrines to mark the places of encounter with God. Anointing stone altars, they offered sacrifice in those locations to remember and celebrate God's saving actions (see examples in



*Landscape with the Pilgrim at Prayer* by Canaletto, ca. 1735/1746.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Gen 12:4-8; 28:10-21; Josh 4:1-3, 19-24). Throughout his life Jesus traveled on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in the early years with family caravans from Nazareth and in later years with his disciples from Capernaum. The Torah specifies three annual pilgrim feasts, in which God's people would bring the first fruits of their harvests and celebrate their exodus (see Deut 16:16-17). Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles remember their liberation from bondage, the gift of the covenant, and God's care in the wilderness. As a faithful Jew, Jesus followed the way of his Israelite ancestors in pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The early generations of Christians marked the sites of Jesus' life with shrines and altars where the Eucharist could be offered. Through the Divine Liturgy the works of salvation are made present again for believers who share in the church's sacred rites. The earliest Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land described the liturgies in these places, especially the celebrations of Holy Week. Egeria, a Spanish pilgrim, described the fourth-century rituals in her diary: the Palm Sunday procession from the Mount of Olives, the Holy Thursday liturgy that ended with a walk to Gethsemane by torchlight, the Good Friday procession with the cross, and the Easter Vigil with the new fire at the empty tomb of Christ.

The celebration of the Mass at sacred places along the pilgrimage route is the daily highlight of most pilgrimages for Catholics. In word and sacrament pilgrims remember God's saving power, and the events of that place become present and real in the lives of the pilgrims. As at Emmaus, the hearts of pilgrims are enflamed with desire and understanding as the word of God is proclaimed and made present in Eucharist.

## **Pilgrimage to Biblical Places**

In the early centuries of Christianity the value of pilgrimage was much debated. Just as some forbade images of Jesus and the saints to be made, so others forbade believers from traveling on pilgrimage. Opponents argued that Christianity is now a universal religion and should not call any particular place holier than any other. God is present everywhere and salvation must now be proclaimed to all people.

The debate about pilgrimage, like the debate about icons, was eventually resolved through an appeal to the Incarnation. Although God's presence and saving grace in Christ are available everywhere to hearts that are open, God's self-revelation has been made known in real places to historical people. The fact that the Word became flesh allows us both to depict the image of the human Christ and to honor the particular places of his

*Pilgrimage celebrates incarnation.*

historical life. There is a genuine spiritual benefit in traveling to the locations where God first manifested salvation to the world. We honor both the humanity and the incarnate divinity of Christ when we traverse the paths where he walked, touch the places he blessed, and pray at the shrines made holy by his risen presence and the witness of his saints.

So, following the way of countless travelers before us, pilgrims travel to Egypt and Sinai to experience again the liberation of the Exodus, to Jordan to see Mount Nebo, where Moses gazed at the Promised Land before his death, and to the place where Jesus was later baptized, at the point where the Israelites passed through the Jordan River. Groups travel to Palestine and Israel to gaze upon the places of Jesus' life from Galilee to Jerusalem. A trip to Turkey allows people to see the churches Paul founded and the seven cities of Revelation, and a journey to Greece lets pilgrims experience the places where the church expanded throughout the first century. Pilgrimages to Rome allow Christians to honor the final ministry of Peter and Paul and to reverence the places and tombs of the early martyrs of that city.

After we have traveled on a biblical pilgrimage the sacred texts become more alive. Pilgrims attest to a deepening desire to study Scripture and grow in their personal understanding of God's Word. When we make a

pilgrimage to these places of the Bible, the spiritual senses become more alive so that, after we return home, every site becomes a thin place where God meets creation and every land becomes holy because the divine presence is truly there and everywhere today.

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