

The Reluctant Pilgrim: Leaving Home

Exodus 3: 1-12

I greet you this morning from the cornfields of Indiana, and I assure you however hot it gets here today, it will be hotter there, and you will survive.

A personal word of appreciation for this institution: I was introduced to this institution at a time in my life when I was in transition, and these past several years have been occasions for growing and learning and healing, and this institution has been a key part of that. I'm grateful for all who have been here and who have nurtured the structures and the institutions so that we might be here.

I'm also grateful for people who persist in attempting to explain to others what this is, especially my friends Dudley and Jim Seal who tried for years and got me here, and for my friends, Ed and Pat, who accompanied me all these years. And I'm grateful for my family who took a great deal of time and effort to come and join me during this time. I thank Joan Brown Campbell, a person whom I have admired through the years for the invitation, for the opportunity to be with you.

A word now to the week before we begin: You can tell from reading the newspaper that this is a series of sermons on The Reluctant Pilgrim. There are a lot of you here today who will not be here the rest of the week. I hope that there is something in one sermon that will nurture and feed you. But if you do return, if you can't make it to all of them, there will be some other things that might speak to this journey of faith, the journey of the soul on which we all travel.

We will be walking with a few of those famous saints through this week. I had a friend this morning ask me if I was nervous. I told her you would have to live in denial to not be nervous to stand up here with this many people, but I am not as nervous as I would be if I were standing alone. I have brought a few friends this week to accompany me. We will talk with Moses later this morning, Mary Magdalene, Jacob, Elijah, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Jesus himself as we seek to discover what it is to engage a pilgrimage of faith, leaving home, and meeting people along the way, and finding our way home again.

I was in Kansas City recently visiting my mother who is in a care facility. My siblings and I have rented an apartment where we stay when we visit there, and we have just done that, and I had never been to the apartment. So I went to the apartment and got there late at night one night and slept, and as it is my custom when I go to a new place, I went out to mark the territory the next morning. I have to find out what it's like where I am around me.

I walked through the apartment complex and saw all of the cars and walked by the swimming pool and the typical apartment pool, 4'x8'. I looked at the fake shingles on the walls of the outside and thought, "This is where I live." I went out to the boulevard that runs by the complex, four lanes, not much traffic early in the morning before dawn. And I was walking down the boulevard, and I saw a man about a block away with a white t-shirt on, on the other side of the street, and he ducked into some woods. I had not seen the woods. All I had seen was the lights in the parking lot, and I thought, "This is going to be fun, an adventure, right here in the suburbs of Kansas City, an adventure."

And I went down hurriedly down the boulevard and cut in where I saw him cut into the woods, and it was the dark woods, and it descended into a stream, and I thought, "Adventure right here in the suburbs." Then I heard a sound. It was a hissing sound. Well, I cleared my eyes, and I moved into the side overlooking to try to figure out where the sound was coming from. And I looked, and there about thirty yards away, I saw this half-million dollar house and this sprinkler systems, tsh—tsh—tsh. I felt cheated.

But not being one to give up, I went back to the trail and walked a bit further, and I saw what looked like a stump right there beside the trail. I got a little closer, and it looked like there was something bright-colored right on top of this stump. I got a little closer, and there was this sewer pipe with a man-hole cover on top and right on top of it was this white and red and yellow plastic McDonald's cup. And I knew this was not going to be an adventure into the wilderness and the woods. This was an urban park. This was where the trail had already been cut.

When I walked through that place I felt like I was in Barnes & Noble, looking for books and spirituality. This forest of books, turning down this aisle, this trail, looking for adventure, and pulling out books, and leafing through the pages, and finding red and

yellow plastic cups – looking for bread and finding popcorn – looking for wine and finding soda pop.

The spiritual journey is one that many of us seek but one that most of us would avoid at all cost. That which is available to define for us the spiritual life of our souls is often inadequate to feed the hunger, the hunger of the soul that is not here at the heart, and it's not down in the gut, but it is behind and below and within. It is the soul that longs to be fed. And so much of what is available is hard to drink.

We long for the grandeur and the terror of the Holy, and we come away lamenting with Shirley Valentine in that wonderful little movie, *Shirley Valentine*, "I live such a little life." Annie Dillard in her classic pilgrimage, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, wonders about our desire for the Holy, our desire for the mystery, when she asks "Have we rode out into the thick darkness, or are we all playing pinochle in the bottom of the boat?" We look for a boat, and we look for the sea, and we look for the mystery, and someone gives us a rulebook by which to play the cards.

When I despair in Barnes & Noble, and when I go to Amazon.com and see 15,000 entries on spirituality, I decide to go back to my office, and I pull out that little stand of woods called the Bible, and I begin to meet my friends. I met Moses in one of those journeys back into that little stand of mystery. I met Moses, and I asked Moses to tell me about his spirit, to tell me about his journey, and you know what, Moses never did go into Barnes & Noble. It didn't happen that way for Moses.

Moses was doing what Moses does. Moses was living his life just the way you and I live our lives. He was doing what he was paid to do. He was doing that which provided him security. He was tending the sheep that belonged to his father-in-law. He was tending sheep, when all of a sudden there was this incredible burning as described in the Bible as the burning of a bush. But my experience is that that which is in the geography of that around us is also in the geography of the soul, and there was something in Moses that helped him see the burning, because it resonated with his own burning, his own flame, his own heart.

Now we don't know what was burning in Moses, and I am one who is reluctant to psychologize anybody else's journey, because I don't want anybody trying to explain mine, because to explain my journey is to lose the mystery. But I've thought about and

in talking with Moses as I walked with Moses, and I've walked a long way with Moses, I've decided that maybe there was something burning, and that it would not be consumed, that was eating away inside of him. You see, Moses had a problem. Moses had two passports in life, a passport to slavery and a passport to royalty.

You remember how he was born, Hebrew, and you remember how he was put into the water. You remember how he was put into the water and the wonder, what will happen to this slave in the water? And how he was rescued by royalty and raised in power. He had two passports, and I think Moses might have had one problem, and that is that the passport to privilege was being burned up inside of him. I think maybe he had lived among the people long enough now to realize that that was not his identity. That was not his picture on the passport.

The passport to privilege was burning, and it burned intensely within him. As it burned, it consumed the cotton that was in his ears, it consumed the scales that were on his eyes, and he could hear his people cry, and he could see their suffering and their pain. That's the burning that caused Moses to leave home. Something caused the insulation around his heart to fall away, and he became one with those who were wounded and those who were his brothers and sisters who were oppressed.

When Moses told me his burning, I felt a memory of my own for I, too, have been stripped of the insulation that protected me from common humanity. My wife of 31 years died of cancer after struggling with it for three years, and when she died, something in my world collapsed. All the protection that I had built up around me, all of the theology, all of the language, all of the words that protected me from the pain disappeared. The words that I spoke felt hollow within me, and they began to disappear as functional. They would no longer work. They were burned in the fire of grief.

It's hard when your house is gone. It's hard when that which protects you disappears, because you feel so intensely the pain and the suffering of everyone around you. You hear the cries, and you feel the pull to leave home, because somewhere along the line, it seems as if home left you. You no longer feel at home. So I understand Moses. I understand the fire, and I understand the longing and the yearning to leave home.

It's a dangerous thing, and it's a hard thing to leave home, and most of us don't want to do that. Most of us do not want to explore the passion and the pain and the noise and the power that we hear when we lose that insulation. We're afraid to leave home. It is frightening to leave home. Moses said to God, "Look God, You want me to go to the power, and You want me to free the people. Who shall I tell them has sent me?" God said, "Tell them I am who I am." Chew on that one a while. See what that feeds in you. See how that nourishes your fear. "I am who I am." What is that?

But when you leave home, and when you begin your spiritual pilgrimage, you are not certain what will feed you. You're not certain there's anything out there that's going to take that fear and transform it again into love. "I am who I am." But friends, the reluctant pilgrims of the Bible have always been people who were willing to go, stripped of their security, trusting a God who is only who God chooses to be.

It's scary, and it leaves you empty. It leaves you so empty that you have to continue to explore the fire. You have to continue to explore where it is leading you. Have you ever wondered why people go to cemeteries to visit the dead? It's because there is a fire that we do not want to die. There is an emptiness that is created as our identity is consumed, and that emptiness takes a long time to fill sometimes. The spiritual journey, for most of us, is a lifetime.

It took Moses about 40 years to fill the empty space created by taking a people out of their security and wandering around in the wilderness suffering in pain, where they didn't know where their bread was going to come from. It took about 40 years. But that's the spiritual pilgrimage.

It is the invitation to explore where you meet God even if there is not a book anywhere that will tell you how to get along with God. It's continuing to explore the passion. It may be a passion that may be created by pain and loss, or it may be a passion to simply live, a passion to dance, a passion to sing, to develop that gift that is in you, that is burning within you to be lived. Whatever it is, the spiritual pilgrimage is the pursuit of that passion.

Judging from what I see when I stand up here, many of you lived with me in front of television sets having our evening dinner as Walter Cronkite served us up pain and war. As we watched the Vietnam War and watched our young come home in body bags,

many of you experienced the burning napalm that stripped a countryside, a napalm that stripped us. It cleared our eyes as we saw the suffering, and that sheer, searing suffering and pain and burning makes a permanent scar on our souls. It did on mine.

What do you do with the pain? In 1987, I went to Vietnam and Cambodia on a mission. I don't know what the mission was. It was called a church mission, but there was something more. It was mission for my soul. It was a mission to go and be present with those who had suffered there. Ten years, 15 years after, we visit again that where terror and holiness emerge. We visit those places where we are on the edge of fear and adventure and courage.

This nation has recently been stripped of its illusion of privilege and safety, and all of us are wandering in the wilderness of wondering who are we, and what does our passport now say about who we are, but we keep going back and visiting the monument. When I go to Washington, DC, I go to that granite rock wall in the ground, and I take shoes off of the feet of my soul. I walk down into that descending rock, and I look up at the names of 58,000 of my contemporaries who are frozen in adolescence. I go, and I weep, and I long to know what it is, what it is that is sacred in this life, where is home for people who are wandering the halls of suffering. I go, and I visit, hoping to discover God.

If you take a spiritual pilgrimage, it takes courage to leave home, but when you leave and explore your passion, trust that the God who is who God is will be with you and help you along the way find a new home.