

The Reluctant Pilgrim: Sacred Memory

The spiritual pilgrimage begins with a burning passion, a passion seeded in the mystery of pain or in the desire of dream. It is a burning that causes us to leave the safe and comfortable mental and emotional structures that have sustained us. It is a burning that calls us to travel, to journey, to discover the Divine and the stranger, to discover God in the cave.

And what distinguishes a pilgrim from a tourist is a sense that along the way and at the end, there are hidden strangers who represent the Holy; that there is, even in the silence, divine comfort; that the Holy is in the sacred sight of the memories to which we journey and the dreams to which we drive.

We see a lot of people on the road of reluctant pilgrims, but there are times on our journeys when we walk alone, for every spiritual pilgrimage in and of itself is one of the soul. And one man has suggested that if you find yourself following a path that already exists, it is probably not your path. We spend time walking. Pilgrimages are ones which are journeys which are taken slow and steady sometimes with shoes off of our feet. They are journeys that we take in the midst of the awe and mystery that surrounds us in the life that we have been given.

We walk. The earth rises in its dust to assault our nostrils, and sometimes even boredom trudges beside us. We put one foot in front of the other. You know sometimes that you are on a spiritual journey when it is all you can do simply to put one foot in front of the other. And as you walk, you walk long enough and alone enough to begin to hear an ache escaping, a groan, a desire. And as you walk, it turns into a sort of beelike hum, first a note or two, first then a melody, and then some parts as it begins to rise within you. – reflecting the beat of your feet sometimes weary and dreary, sometimes staccato and fast as you move, the song begins to rise. Every pilgrimage is accompanied by a song.

Phil Cousineau in his book, *The Art of Pilgrimage*, says, “All of the ancient pilgrims who traveled these lands traveled with a song, as they paddled their strokes across lakes, as they walked across mountains.” One of our ancient ancestors, Mary, who is the mother of Jesus, began her reluctant pilgrimage with a song. Some may wonder

why I call Mary a reluctant pilgrim, for sometimes Mary is portrayed as one who willingly and happily submitted to the will of the Holy, but at least the way I have read the Scripture, it appears to me that Mary had some real reservations. You will remember how the angel appeared to Mary and said, “Mary, guess what? You’re going to have a baby.”

It’s amazing to me, but it seems to me that almost all spiritual pilgrimages of those who have been reflected for us in the Bible are people whose journey began when that which they were doing was disrupted by God. Mary’s life was disrupted. You’re going to have a baby, and we are told the first thing she did was ponder these thought in her heart. I don’t know about you, but when I begin to ponder, it usually is about that which has changed, disrupted the way I was going. It’s about something that really matters, something I have to pray about.

Mary worried about these things, and she felt inadequate. She says, “What do you mean, I’m going to have a baby? I can’t have a baby. I am a virgin.” Not unlike Moses who said, “I can’t go and speak. I am too young. I cannot speak.” The saints have always, when disrupted and called by God to do something out of the ordinary, have been reluctant to respond and have sought any excuse that they could find. But Mary had heard the word, and the first thing Mary did was go see her kin, Elizabeth, a woman who not unlike Mary, had her life disrupted, not as a young woman and a virgin but as an old woman and barren, when she was told by the same God, you’re going to have a baby. Mary went to the wisdom of the aged.

When we find ourselves called on a pilgrimage, one of the first places to go is to consult with the wise, those who have been there, those who know what it is to have a dream and have a dream die. To being a pilgrimage is to consult with those who know. I found on my pilgrimage that there were counselors to whom I went. There were pastors and friends who did not let me sit alone all the time in my cave, but who were willing to walk with me and be still and let me listen.

I found that there were counselors and guides who came to me in books. Gerald Sittser in *A Grace Disguised* tells the story of the loss of part of his family and how struggled to make sense, one of the most amazing books. Some of you have brought it to me and said, “Did you read this?” Yes. And Belden Lane whose incredible works

regarding mountain and desert spirituality as he explores what it means to be faithful to the God, who is sitting with his mother who is dying of cancer. These are friends to whom I went and found solace in fierce landscapes.

But after Mary went to Elizabeth, we are told what happened was that she began to sing. And I appreciate the reader singing the Amen, because Mary's song was a song. It was not a saying; it was a song. Mary began to sing a song that she knew from her sister who lived hundreds of years earlier, Hannah, who discovered what it was to bear into the world one who would help the oppressed, one who would hear the pain, and the cry, and respond to God, who was crying out in suffering. Mary sang the song of Hannah, of her sisters.

Songs are often brief history lessons. Songs frequently embody the stories that define who we are. I know many people in congregations I've served whose theology was not shaped by reading Karl Barth or by reflecting on some theologian, but their theology was shaped by the hymns of the church. The songs shape the soul, because they are stories that are embodied and implanted deep within the psyche. Stories, when they are sung, nourish our spirits and warm our hearts.

Last winter I went down to southern Indiana to Brown County and spent a couple of nights in a cabin down there. In southern Indiana, you may not know, but we do have some what we call mountains. They're actually just hills, but we even have a ski resort down in southern Indiana. And I went down there to a cabin. I actually went down there, and they didn't have any room in a cabin, so I went and checked into the lodge. But as I was checking in, I said, "Do you have a cabin," and they had a cabin that somebody had cancelled out. I went in there, and there was a great glass wall that looked down on these naked, empty trees of winter.

I built a fire, a fire in this potbellied stove in the middle of the room. I built a fire, and I sat down in front of the fire, and I felt the heat of that fire as I wrapped a quilt around my shoulders, because it was cold out behind me in the dark, but it was warm in the fire, and I remember. I remember our ancient mothers and fathers who used to gather around campfires, and even in traditional societies today, where they gather around campfires and tell stories, warmed by the stories of the fire and cold on their

backs as it faces the black night outside. I was thinking about that, and I was watching the fire burn.

But in the silence of those Indiana hills, I also heard the fire sing, and it popped and cracked, and it sang its notes and pitches. I began to think, yes, the fire is singing its story, for what is this but stories packed in circles around a tree. Years and years of stories this tree has seen. Years and years of pilgrims have walked beside it. It has stories to tell, and it is broken and cut and piled up with others, and in the heat of the fire, it sings its song. And I sat and was warmed by the stories of the pilgrims who had walked the hills of southern Indiana.

We sing our stories. They warm our hearts. But we sing also for memory. We sing also to remember that we are one with a people who is other than us, but who is us – with strangers whom we do not know, but whom we do know. Mary sang a song of identification – of identification with all of her sisters who were oppressed, with all of her brothers who were put down, with all of the slaves of her history. She identified through song, a song which wrapped itself around her and warmed her like a quilt, a quilt of memory.

The songs we sing are ways in which we identify ourselves and gain strength from those who've gone before. Songs also help us sort out the threads of our lives and bring them up so we can weave them into some new life. Songs help us find the notes that are dancing around deep within our spirits, that allow us – that are in a chaotic form within us, and songs help put them in order, so that they make sense to us, so that we can do something with them.

Not long after my wife died, my son was going back to college, and he needed a car, and he needed my car. And I told him that he could have my car. So in an effort to facilitate that transfer of my transportation, he went with me to buy a new car. We went, and the man said, “Do you want a moon roof on your car.” I said, “I don't know,” and Stephen said, “Yes, he wants a moon roof.” This isn't the car he's getting. He's getting the old Toyota. He says, “Do you want a CD?” “No, I don't have any CDs.” Stephen said, “Yes, he wants a CD player, because he'll have CDs.”

Stephen was right. The car became my sanctuary, and the CD player became my song. My family sent me CDs to help me along the way. They sent me songs they

thought would help me travel on my journey. They sent me songs of love that made me weep. They sent me songs of harsh, loud and angry words that made me scream. I remember driving through the back roads of this country with my moon roof open, with Delbert McClinton singing hard, southern rock, raw and rash. And I stuck my fist through the roof, and my anger and my frustration spilled out into the sky. The songs brought from me that anger that was stirring and depressing my soul and named it, so that I could weave it into the world that was coming, so that I could create a new world symphony for me to sing. We sing in order to find the notes within us, so that we can write our new song.

Several years ago I traveled with a group from our Seminary to the west coast of Africa to Ghana, and there were 13 of us on this trip, 11 African-Americans and two Anglo-Americans. We were traveling together on a bus in heat. Hot, I don't know how hot. I kept asking how hot, and they said, "It's hot." "But how hot?" "Well, it's just hot," and it was. We traveled on this bus. Our patience wore thin as the tires that were bumping over the dirt roads. It was an interesting experience on this bus, because I am not often a minority, and I was on this bus. It was an amazing experience.

Many of my African-American colleagues were singing – singing songs, and their stories were punctuated with songs and Scriptures, and it was just colorful. And every once in a while I tried to get my story in, and I just couldn't get it in. I didn't know how to get it in. I felt like I was left out, but they didn't want to leave me out. It was simply the culture. It was the way they did things, and I was so colorless. It was an incredible experience, one that has transformed my understanding of what it means to be excluded, not intentionally but simply by the nature of the way life is structured.

But one of our places where we went were the slave castles on the coast – the slave castles where thousands and hundreds of thousands of human beings were stashed in rooms to wait to be transported as slaves all over the world. I went with these brothers and sisters. We walked where my colleagues' ancestors had walked. We went into dungeons where men and women had been stashed so tightly they could not lie down, and they were stashed for days. And people died, and they simply stood on top of the dead, and the dead rotted into the soil.

We walked on that ground, and we were stunned as we walked through the door of no return. I saw in my African-American brothers and sisters a pride begin to rise as they returned through the door of no return. Something happened while we were walking on those sacred and hollow grounds. We no longer were tourists, but we became pilgrims. And after we had walked together, we stood almost silent, wondering what to say. And one young woman began this song:

“Lift every voice and sing til earth and heaven ring.
Ring with harmonious liberty.
Let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies.
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of faith that the dark past has taught us.
Sing a song full of hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun.
Let us march on til victory is won.”

And as she began to sing, the voices chimed in. And I was a part of one body of memory, and power, and identification. I was a part, as an Anglo-American, walking in a pilgrimage of pain with my brothers and sisters of African descent. And the music spoke the memory, and it bound us together in a common identity with those who had gone before. It planted its power in our souls, for we were not singing simply about the past, but we were singing about the future. At the end of the song, they said, “Never again! Never again!”