Focus on Spiritual Formation: Pilgrimage

After Moses and Aaron arrived, they told Pharaoh, “This is what the Lord God of Israel says: Let my people go so they may make a pilgrimage for me in the desert.” Exodus 5:1

“Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.” Psalm 84:5

“And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them ….” Matt. 20:17

The Practice

Pilgrimage, to people all over the world, is a spiritual exercise, an act of devotion.

It is most typically a journey to an earthly place that has a sacred meaning. Pilgrimage destinations can also be geographical power spots or "thin" places such as deserts, mountains, islands, or any place or setting that inspires and conveys sanctity. Traditional pilgrimage may be a duty or a privilege. It is always a journey of risk and renewal.

The goal is discovery of God and of truth about ourselves.

Getting started

Pilgrimage begins with a call or a yearning. Intention develops to find a specific location or occasion. The journey may be taken alone but often is shared with other pilgrims. The way will have challenges which are expected. Outwardly, we encounter challenges because we are traveling a new road. Inwardly, the self is troubled as it disconnects from the ordinary life and the familiar. Each challenge creates meaning.

What helps? Along the way we can support our intention and focus our attention by observing complementary practices and rituals such as Confucius’ Five Excellent Practices of Pilgrimage:

- Practice the art of attention and listening
- Practice renewing yourself each day
- Practice meandering toward the center of every place
- Practice the ritual of reading sacred texts
- Practice gratitude and praise singing

What is happening? Mindfulness and soulfulness develop our ability to respond from our deepest place. We really look, not overlook. Curiosity is also our ally to find the extraordinary in the ordinary. Is there a secret or right way to engage in pilgrimage? No, our own way is the right way.

On our way we will experience two unique effects. Victor and Edith Turner, anthropologists, named them communitas and liminality. Communitas is becoming as one with our fellow pilgrims. It is cathartic and transformational to experience social dividers vanishing on a journey where ritual and challenge are shared. John Philip Newell marveled that "being present to the heart of the other, looking with love to the essence of the other, this releases the truest depth in one another."

The equally unique phenomenon of liminality finds us held in between worlds. According to Wikipedia, Liminality is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, when
participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. We have separated from a previous life but are in transition to a place, a stage, not yet reached. Change is daily. Disorientation roughs us up a bit.

The destination arrives. The experiences are integrated. We now are a butterfly or just a wiser more authentic person.

The ultimate challenge is coming home and bringing all the rich experience and transformed pieces of our pilgrimage into the pursuit of our daily living. In a sense, our entire life is a pilgrimage.

**Background**

4000 years ago Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees to seek the presence of God in the land of Canaan. Early and medieval Christians began pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, and Canterbury. Holy sites like Lourdes, Mount Sinai, and Santiago de Compostela were popular centuries ago and remain so today. The Bible, the Torah, the Koran, and the holy texts of Hinduism and Buddhism all admonish their followers to engage in pilgrimage. These sites relate to the founders of a faith tradition or Saints. In modern times pilgrimage is experiencing a revival. Trinity members have been to the Holy Land, Mount Sinai, and the Scottish island of Iona. But a pilgrimage may be from “here” to the post office. An ordinary trip can become a sacred journey. It is the intention and attention that transforms our lives and shows us the face of God.

**At Trinity**

Retreats have a pilgrimage theme. The labyrinth we enjoyed last Advent and other Advent and Lent special practices have elements of pilgrimage. Mission trips also are journeys with intent that bring us closer to God and his people.

**Further Resources**

Sheryl H. Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage - The Sacred Art: Journey to the Center of the Heart*, 2013