

“Pilgrim Stories”

Preached by Casey Bushman on Sunday, August 27th, 2023
At St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Y'all will be hearing some pilgrimage stories today, if you haven't guessed it yet. I also encourage you to check out the Parish Life wall in the Parish Hall, where you'll find some really beautiful written reflections from each of our pilgrims. It will inspire you and encourage you to read what they've written. So please do check those out after service. Our youth worked really hard on those. (I also promised them if they did a good job, I wouldn't make them speak in front of you today.)

The prophet Isaiah writes to the righteous remnant in Israel: “Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many.” I've been thinking a lot about Abraham and Sarah this week, the father and mother of our faith. You could make a case that Abraham and Sarah were actually the first pilgrims — the first people that God called to get up and go, to make a long journey to a new place where God promised to meet them. I'd like to draw out this connection and use the story of Abraham and Sarah to talk about our pilgrimage experience and what we all might be able to take from it.

I want to start by talking about walking. It might seem like a pretty obvious takeaway from the story, but Abraham and Sarah had to walk a *long way* on the journey to their new home. In a few weeks, when we tell this story to our Godly Play kids, the storyteller will take two wooden figures (like this) and move them inch by inch through the sand in our Desert Box, leaving behind a little trail of footsteps that stretch from two parallel strands of blue yarn (marking the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) all the way across the vast desert. This movement is intentionally slow. The figures don't hop quickly over to the other side, nor do they zoom across the landscape — they plod through the sand in a manner that reminds the children that each step required tremendous energy — and faith.

We did a LOT of walking on our pilgrimage. And we didn't just walk in order to get to interesting places; the walking was the point; it was the goal rather than the means to an end. One day we walked a couple miles on a remote trail through the Scottish countryside into the town of Melrose, imagining what it would have been like to be a traveler in say the 12th century stumbling upon the breath-taking Melrose Abbey. We walked along the beach one day, in the pouring rain, from Seaside to Bambergh Castle, as our guide told us the story of the risen Christ meeting the disciples on the road to Emmaus (that day we walked about seven miles total, which is the approximate distance between Jerusalem and Emmaus). And at the heart of our trip we traveled on the ancient Pilgrim's Way to the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, a barefoot 3 mile trek across muddy terrain that is only passable at low tide. A series of wooden poles marked out the Pilgrim's Way, and as our group walked in silence we stopped at every third or fourth pole to pray together and reflect on the words of Celtic saints.

Purposeful walking can be a powerful spiritual practice that resets our internal clock. Our youth (and adults) experienced this slowing down as a tremendous disruption of our normal, frenzied pace of life. Within hours of settling into the small town of Berwick-upon-Tweed, our home for the first half of the week, everyone was remarking on how quiet and unhurried life seemed to be in this place. One of our pilgrims would later reflect on how the opportunities to walk and journal and worship made normal life feel so “loud.” So much noise. I wonder if you can relate.

Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama once observed that “Jesus never moved faster than 3 miles per hour.” Three miles per hour, the average speed of a human walking. John Swinton writes about having a conversation about the ‘3 mile per hour Jesus’ with a friend in a fast-paced career. The friend complained, “My busy job demands that I move at 9 miles per hour!” Swinton replied, “If Jesus is walking at three miles an hour, and you’re walking at nine miles an hour……. who is following whom?”

The next move of the Godly Play storyteller relating the story of Abraham and Sarah to 4 and 5 year olds is to have the two wooden figures stop for a rest at a couple of places along the journey — Bethel, then Shechem — places where Abraham and Sarah came so close to God and God came so close to them, that they built stone altars to remember those sacred places. (The storyteller will build an altar too, piling 3 or 4 small rocks on the sand.)

The Celtic tradition calls these “thin places.” Thin places are places where God comes close, where the boundary between heaven and earth seems to disappear. One of our pilgrims reflected on the Celtic knot and that image of an intricate weaving together of various strands, symbolizing the overlap between God’s realm and ours.

Our pilgrimage took us to several thin places that left an impact on our youth. You can read about one pilgrim’s experience atop the cairn at Cuthbert’s Cave, a beautiful and sacred place where Saint Cuthbert — a fellow introvert and my new favorite saint — retreated often for long periods of solitude and rest. We sensed God’s closeness in active places of worship like Saint Aiden’s Church, and at ruins like Dryburgh Abbey, where the imagination fills in the gaps of what has been lost to time to envision a community of disciples devoted to work and prayer and mission. Someone told us early on in the trip, “The ‘communion of saints’ isn’t an abstract idea here or something we just say in the Creed; you can really feel the presence of the faithful who have gone before you.”

We all need to stop and rest at those thin places, where God comes close, where heaven and earth converge, and where we feel the cloud of witnesses surrounding us. The journey is too long and too difficult to pass these places by.

We’ve arrived at the point in the story of Abraham and Sarah where things start to get really interesting: their arrival in Hebron, the strange visitors from the desert, Sarah

overhearing their promise that she would soon bear a child and LAUGHING OUT LOUD at the thought of becoming pregnant at such a wildly old age. But, of course, she does, and Isaac is born. They had received this promise before their journey ever began.

“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you; ...
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

Abraham and Sarah surely carried these divine promises with them all along their journey, but it doesn't seem to have really become real to them until they heard this prophecy from strangers, or maybe until Sarah began showing or feeling kicks, or maybe until they were holding their son in their arms. Then, all of the sudden, it was clear that their lives had been woven into a much bigger story that was only just beginning.

Connecting with God's big story: this became my primary goal for our band of pilgrims during our week in the UK. Connecting to the story of Christianity, the story of the church, the story of the saints. A story big enough to hold space for each of them. And it was a joy to see little glimpses of our youth connecting with that story throughout the week. On our second day, a Sunday, we attended morning Eucharist at The Parish Church of St. Mary the Virgin, an 800 year-old church on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. The liturgy began: “Blessed be the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” and then “The Lord be with you, *and also with you*,” and the Collect for Purity, the Confession, the Gloria, the Collect of the Day, and so on. I sensed lightbulbs turning on all around me as we all began to realize that this Church of England liturgy is *awfully similar* to what we do every week at St. Mark's, back at home. Imagine that! :) All of the sudden we could see ourselves within the bigger story — a worldwide communion of churches reading the same scriptures and saying the same prayers and worshipping God in this ancient way every week. It was a beautiful “aha” moment.

Seeing yourself as part of a great story makes all the difference. It can be transformative.

Can I close by sharing with you my favorite part of the Godly Play story about Abraham and Sarah? It's the ending. The kids hear all about Isaac being born and growing up and meeting his wife Rebekah. And then the storyteller says, “*And Isaac and Rebekah had children, and their children had children, and those children had children, and this kept on happening until your grandparents had your parents, and your parents had... you.*” And as they say the word “you,” for the first time in the entire story, the storyteller looks up from the materials and makes eye contact with each of the children in the circle, and says to them, “Now we are all part of that Great Family.”

“Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you.” Let us indeed look to

our pilgrim forebears, and press on in our journey together toward God's magnificent dream.

Amen.