

July 6, 2008 John A. Baldwin

**“Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection.”**

These words from this morning's Collect are appropriate ones on a morning when we are commissioning 9 youth pilgrims and 4 adult leaders to set off on a pilgrimage to Arkansas tomorrow morning. So too are the words from this morning's Gospel in which Jesus says to his disciples, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

The Old and New Testaments are filled with stories about people setting out on journeys, either at the explicit call of God, or in hopes of seeking and finding God.

- Noah and his Ark
- Abraham and Sarah
- Moses and the people of Israel in the Wilderness
- The Israelites returning from exile in Babylonia
- Jesus and the calling of the 12
- The sending forth of the disciples

Over the centuries, Christians have left home as evangelists and missionaries to spread the Gospel; fled as refugees under persecution, invaded as conquerors, set forth as pilgrims, and traveled as tourists, experiencing both hospitality and hostility with those they have met along the way. The spiritual journey..... growth in faith.... requires movement – setting forth, opening up our vistas and senses, encountering the new and being transformed in the process by God.

St. Augustine some centuries ago wrote - "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." The word Pilgrim literally comes from the Latin word meaning "resident alien". This world is not our home. Our life on earth is just one stop on a physical and spiritual journey home to God, to whom we truly belong. We are a pilgrim people. For us not to move forward in faith leads to dull routine, atrophy, and stagnation. The most narrow-minded and bigoted people are those who are rooted in the ways things “have always been” and who respond in fear and antagonism towards anything that threatens their status quo.

This morning we are focusing on one form of the movement of the Spirit: pilgrimages. Our model of pilgrimage is Jesus himself - God who lived among us - who lived life humbly and simply, who ate with and befriended the poor, who embraced and loved all the world, who sought closeness with his heavenly Father wherever he was, and who never stayed too long in one place. Jesus saw in each new encounter along the way, an opportunity for love and grace. He encouraged his disciples to travel, but travel light and unburdened, carrying only the essentials - “Come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.”

From the time of the early Church, people have chosen to become pilgrims in order to know Christ more deeply. Often a special destination, a holy place is chosen as the focus of their journey.....Jerusalem, Rome, Canterbury, Lourdes, Santiago de Compostela (Spain). Yet often the destination is not nearly as important as the journey itself. A pilgrimage sets things in motion, creates a new field of relationships, takes pilgrims outside their comfort zones, and often produces unintended consequences. It involves transformation, as a pilgrim separates from their

known world, and crosses a threshold into a place where God may be encountered in a fresh new way.

Since our first J2A pilgrimage in 2000, our youth have gone on pilgrimages to South Dakota, the Appalachian Mountains, Ireland, Southern California and now Arkansas. If pilgrimages were about traveling as tourists, at least 3 of the 4 would seem odd choices for destinations. Pilgrimage to Arkansas?!!

During my own life I've had the good fortune to go on many journeys, but not many pilgrimages. I love to travel....I went around the world with my family when I was a young teenager. I've traveled extensively in Western & Eastern Europe as a young adult. I've gone on 3 exchanges of pulpits to England, and vacationed with Ann and my daughters throughout much of the USA. For nearly 30 years, poor Ann has had to put up with my enthusiasm as a tourist "If we can do 10 things today, great. If we can do 11 even better." This is not pilgrimage.

Here are 3 journeys in my life that more faithfully resemble authentic pilgrimages:

- 1) Exchanging vows with my wife and partner of 30 years, Ann Elizabeth Scherm, and entering with her into the adventure of marriage with its highs & lows, joys & challenges. We would not have endured & grown but for the love of God, the presence of Christ, & the grace of the Holy Spirit. We've been on a pilgrimage together that continues to this day.
- 2) Returning to the boarding school I attended for 5 years for my 30<sup>th</sup> reunion, and being invited to preach in the school chapel. I experienced healing of relationships, received recognition by my classmates for gifts that had been dormant during my years in that setting, and a deep sense of peace in a place that had been a source of pain & conflict during my teenage years.
- 3) Moving to new ministries in Ft. Washington, Maryland, St. Louis Park, Minnesota & Emmanuel, Virginia Beach. Each involved leaving the safe & familiar, & entering as an alien into new faith communities, opening my heart to others, & finding the presence of Christ in a new place.

Although I've touched only briefly on these 3 pilgrimage experiences, I hope you have discerned within them something of your own spiritual journey....experiences you can relate to of moving on in life, opening new doors, & seeking a deeper connection with God. Pilgrimage is a journey deeper & deeper into the heart of God. The objective is not getting somewhere or achieving something. It's not about where we travel, but how we travel. It's a journey on the outside, to mark a journey on the inside. The journey involves waking up and paying attention to our lives.... being alert for the movement of the Holy Spirit. It is a journey of the heart as well as the head. Amen.