

We are a Pilgrim People

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Here it is already, the second Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent is often seen as a journey from darkness to light or from death to life. It could be said that it is a journey from the world toward the Kingdom of God. However you look at Lent it is a journey of some sort and it is always a journey toward the better.

Our Scripture verses today talk about journeys. In Genesis we learn of Abram, later to be named Abraham by the Lord, who answers the call to travel to a foreign land. He's not even sure where he's going, he only knows that he wishes to be obedient. So he packs up his entire household, including his wife, Sarai, and his nephew, Lot, and off they go into the great unknown.

I've often imagined the conversation between Abram and Sarai when he broke the news to her that they were about to move:

“Now who told you this?” she asks.

“The Lord God Almighty.” he replies.

Sarai – “And just where did he say you were to go?”

Abram – “We are going to a place that he will show us.”

Sarai - “That's it? No place name, no road map?”

Abram – “No, God will let us know when we have arrived at our destination.”

Sarai- “Abe, I think you may have been spending too much time in the sun today!”

Fortunately, Abram didn't let Sarai's doubts keep him from following God's leading.

The other journey in today's readings is believed to have been a pilgrimage. It is possible that Psalm 121 was written as song to be sung as worshippers made their way toward a sacred moment or a sacred space, like the Temple. Perhaps it was sung as pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem for the Passover. The word pilgrimage caught my attention when I read this information. Pilgrimage is not a word that I use in my everyday conversations.

Any of you who have heard me speak in the past know that I like to understand the meaning of words. So you won't be surprised that I looked up the words pilgrim and pilgrimage, just to be sure I had a correct understanding of these terms.

According to Webster's New World Dictionary a pilgrim is someone who travels around, a wanderer. I thought that sounded a little like our friend Abram, as he set out wandering until the Lord told him "this is the place." A pilgrimage is a journey made by a pilgrim (makes sense doesn't it?), especially to a holy place (like the Temple), or it could simply mean a long journey. Again, much like Abram as he set out from Haran to parts unknown.

Anyone who has studied American history would be familiar with our own pilgrims, the early settlers of the Plymouth colony situated in present-day Plymouth, Massachusetts. The Pilgrims' were religious dissenters who had fled a volatile political environment in England for the relative calm and tolerance of 16th–17th century Holland in the Netherlands. The Pilgrims held Calvinist religious beliefs but, unlike other Puritans, maintained that their congregations needed to be separated from the English state church. As a separatist group, they were also concerned that they might lose their English cultural identity if they immigrated to the Netherlands, so they arranged with English investors to establish

a new colony in North America. The colony was established in 1620, the second successful English settlement in North America after Jamestown, Virginia.

Unfortunately, while seeking religious freedom for their own group, the Pilgrims exhibited intolerance to other faiths. Although the pilgrims sought something better for themselves, they were not willing to offer the same to those different from them.

Although the story of the first pilgrims in America is an important part of our history, as I thought about these different pilgrim stories, I found myself identifying more with the ancient pilgrims. The American pilgrims seemed to trust more in their own plans and business arrangements than in the God they worshipped. Abram, however, in faith set out on a journey to an unknown land. The psalmist and his compatriots set out on a journey toward a holy place as an expression of faith. I believe we, too, are faithfully traveling on a journey toward something both unknown and holy.

Abram set out from his homeland trusting in the Lord to lead him to a land where his family would become a great nation. This took a great deal of faith since Abram had no family other than his wife and nephew at the time. For Abram the journey to the land God promised wasn't a straight path, verse 9 of Genesis 12 says "And Abram journeyed on by stages ..."

So by stages, through famine and war, Abram finally arrived at the place that God had in mind for him. We believe it to be a better place than where he was originally. But even once he had arrived in the place God showed to him, things were not all he might have hoped for. Lot, who had traveled with him, now had a large number of flocks and herds himself. The herders of both men quarreled over

fields and wells. The land was not enough to support all of Abram's and Lot's livestock and people together. As we know they parted ways and Abram settled in the land of Canaan, the land promised to him by God. This land was good and Abram prospered there.

While we may not have been instructed by God to go to a place he would show us, we have traveled unknown paths, as well. As young people we set out on this journey we call life, unsure of where it would take us, trusting that we would find success along the way. Not everyone's journey has been smooth, but like Abram we have continued on the journey, trusting that the Lord will bring us to the place he has planned for us. Many of us have traveled a road marked by a number of detours and rough patches. We have traveled in stages much like Abram. Each stage of life has brought with it joys and sorrows, choices and challenges. Some of us can identify with Abram and the family struggles he encountered once he reached his journey's end. In all the ups and downs of our pilgrim journey, we have relied on God's faithfulness to see us through.

The pilgrims chanting Psalm 121 left their worldly work and homes to travel to a holy place, God's house. Along the journey's path they recall the Lord who made heaven and earth, the Lord that is worthy of their trust as they journey to the sacred space. They are trusting that he will watch over them until they reach their journey's end. They raised their eyes to the hills, perhaps the Temple Mount itself, looking to that place where they believed their help resided. The psalmist and his co-travelers trusted that God would protect them from whatever might come their way, even if that something might be nature itself.

The psalmist reflects that the Lord will be your shade against the sun in the day and your protection from the moon at night. I understand needing protection from the desert sun, but have you ever wondered why the psalmist would mention the moon? The Latin word for moon is Luna, from which we get the words lunatic and lunacy. It was believed that the moon brought on insanity and so the moon's rays must be harmful. But God's pilgrim people do not need to fear either the sun or the moon for God their keeper will protect them from harm.

For some of us, when things are going well for us, it feels as if the sun is shining directly on us, that's when we feel closest to God. At other times, when things aren't so good, as if the sun has set on us, we feel discouraged and far from God. It can feel as if we were wandering with no sense of direction in a dark and dreary land.

Yet for some of us, it is those times of trial in the darkest night that we find ourselves embraced by God. When we come to the end of our own powers, we find a power beyond anything we could humanly imagine. God's protection, which knows no boundaries, is with us at all times, the good and the bad. It is present in the pilgrim's going out and coming in. God is ever-present preserving us from evil, keeping our souls safe. What a comfort and encouragement to know that the Lord God is with us throughout every step of our journey.

We, like the pilgrim psalmist, are journeying from the worldly, the everyday doings of life, to the holy. While we are not traveling hard scabble roads to Solomon's Temple, we are traveling a spiritual path to come before the Lord. We are seeking that "better thing," that we learned about in this story about Jesus:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹ "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. ^[a] Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

As we seek the "better thing" we have learned that God does not slumber nor does he sleep. He has been with us each and every step of the way that has brought us to this place this morning. I would imagine there are those of you here today who could recount a time that it seemed that God was sleeping, but you discovered afterward that he had been present with you all along.

Some may feel that God is sleeping now, where we are today can seem uncertain. Some of us are facing health crises, others have concerns for their finances, and there are those who have concerns for family members who might be going down the wrong path. For many here and around the world there is a great deal of anxiety over the political climate in our own and various other countries. Dan Rather, the former newscaster, has dubbed this time the "Age of Anxiety" in America. We don't know where the journey will go from here as leaders make decisions that we hope are in our best interests. As believers, even though we may not know how the journey will go we do know how it will end. We have this confidence because God sent his son, Jesus, a pilgrim himself, traveling to and from Egypt as a child, and wandering the ancient Palestinian countryside as an

adult, to bring the kingdom of God close to each of us. Jesus, himself, declared he is the Way, the path to the kingdom. He is the road map, the place name, the landmark on the journey of life. He is our guide and our destination.

We are pilgrims on a journey, like Abram, traveling to a place not known to us now, but one that the Lord has promised will be filled with milk and honey and all things good. A place of quiet rest. A place where all the questions and doubts of this life will be answered, where anxiety will cease. That place where the wanderings and wonderings of our lives will find their end, and we will at last find peace in the presence of the God who loves us, always.

Prayer:

Father God, you have set us on a journey that at times seems perilous, yet we have confidence that you are with us and will not allow our foot to be moved. You will not let the sun or the moon cause us harm. We rest in the promise that you neither slumber nor sleep, but are with us in all of our comings and goings, today and until that day you call each of us home to you. Thank you for your promises, given to us in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. AMEN

Pastor Lynne Allebach

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