

We Make the Way by Walking

As a part of the series “Along the Way: Reflections from the Camino”

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Genesis 12:1-9

By Rev. Ridgley Beckett

Last Sunday at this time was drenched in sweat pushing as quickly and as safely as I could to Charleston, South Carolina on my bicycle. I had ridden 160 miles over the past two days, and I needed to get these last 100 miles done and the other cyclists I was riding with felt the same way. We lined ourselves up in a paceline—two wide, taking turns leading the pack. We pushed each other, we provided a vacuum of aerodynamics that kept us speedy, and, *together*, we were better. We had many things in common: we were hot, we were tired. We wanted to be done. But the thing that united us was that we wanted to see a day where there's a cure to Alzheimer's Disease.

Last weekend, over 450 cyclists and 150 volunteers came together to complete a 3 day 260-mile bike ride from Greenville, South Carolina to Charleston, South Carolina. Our mission was to raise money to end Alzheimer's. So far we have raised over \$1.38 million dollars this year to help with research and keep services running that supports caregivers. This 17 year old ride of maybe 600 people in South Carolina makes up 1% of the worldwide budget that the Alzheimer's Association puts toward research for a cure. Many of you helped us reach that goal, and together, we did it. Another year down, and another year closer to a world without this terrible disease.

While the Ride to End Alzheimer's is far from a race, when the temps are creeping up and the humidity is high in South Carolina in July, we race the clock to the finish line for comfort and relief from the oppressive heat. Many of you probably think we're crazy, but there is something that is really exhilarating about the Ride to End Alzheimer's for me—it may sound exhausting to you, but journeying with these folks year after year provides a bond that is stronger than ever. You don't just chat about the weather or where there is rough road or a hole ahead—you encourage each other up the hill, reminding the person to your right that they're stronger than they think they are. That the destination is just a few more miles, make sure you drink water. And by the way—it's been a year—is your daughter doing better? Has she found a place that she feels like she truly belongs yet? How are you managing your job transition? Have you found your joy yet. I'm sorry about that break up—don't forget you're not alone. We're gonna get there, just 10 more miles until we rest in the shade. Shocking to none of you, I am known as the “preacher” who brings up “deep stuff” on the ride.

Journeying together is the thing that is exhilarating for me. I wrote a sermon about an accident I had on my first ride to end Alzheimer's—a pretty serious one. And in my moment of great need—the strangers I met that day—became my lifeline. It was then I realized that this group—in many ways—was my family. Journeying together with the cyclists, the volunteers and my donors—that's what gives me energy, that's what is exhilarating, and that is what makes this ride worth it for me even after the 13th year. We're all in it together, whether you're a caregiver, a rider, a patient, a volunteer or a cyclist.

Often a journey is overshadowed by the destination, like my cycling ride. But what if your journey was so long that you realized the purpose of journeying wasn't the destination? That the path and the trek were actually why you were there.

We don't always think about our life together and our experiences as a "journey" really. Even the concept of a "faith journey" is rather foreign to some. Our scriptures are full of sacred stories of people's lives journeying together, relating to a God who claims them, loves them, guides them and is a living breathing part of the very fabric of their lives--all of it.

The book of Genesis shifts in Chapter 12 where our scripture reading begins—the first twelve chapters outline what scholars call the “primeval history” --stories like how God created the earth in 7 days, Cain and Abel, the flood and Noah's Ark.

Then Chapter 12 begins and we meet Abram and Sarai—one of the first “called” in the Bible by God—we aren't given a reason WHY they are called—what we first learn about Abram is WHAT he is chosen to do. TO GO-- To travel—to journey, trust and follow God. And with this journey came a blessing. Abram was chosen not because of who he is, but because of who God is. Abram is blessed to be a blessing—a conduit of God's provision and grace.

If we look closely, our scriptures are FULL of people *traveling, walking, taking pilgrimages*. I didn't realize it until I started learning more about Jewish holidays and seasons. So many of our passages include descriptions about people traveling to a specific location, stopping along the way, or arriving somewhere. Even our scripture this morning---the bulk of the last three verses are accounting for describing Abram's journey:

-Who he goes with: His wife Sarai and nephew Lot

-What they brought: all the possessions they had

-Where they were going: to the land Canaan, then toward the hills east of Bethel, then toward the Negev.

I am struck by the fact that Abram in the passage doesn't journey alone—he also travels with Sarah, his wife and his nephew Lot, but God is with him every step of the way—which is why he is building altars. His journey is marked by uncertainty, courage and trust in God. His steps are guided by God, and they're alongside of his partner, his family.

The passage doesn't just say “then Abram went to Canaan.” We get these descriptive details of what he is doing along the way, who he is doing it with—how he is marking his travels—this journey is far more than the destination. Our passage is showing us that what we do along the way, matters too.

This is why the term “journey” can be used when we talk about our faith. Some assume that the destination is our salvation or choosing to believe in God or even eternal life when our earthly time is done here. But as Presbyterians, our focus is on how we live here NOW in gratitude for what God has already done for us in the *past*.

That can be really challenging for us to think about—if there isn't a goal, what's the point? There is a Spanish poet who once said “We make the road by walking” and it gets at what this is about. The purpose of our journey is the making of a way, discerning, opening our eyes to see what God is teaching us, shifting our focus from the WHAT to the HOW.

On sabbatical this past January, I was given a grant by the Board of Pensions to cycle the Portuguese Camino. The Portuguese Camino is a path—a way—a journey one takes, by foot, or, in my case, by bicycle from Lisbon to Spain. The Portuguese Camino is part of the Camino de Santiago which is a complex web of trails that wind across Great Britain and Europe and converge at the tomb of St James in a Cathedral in Santiago de Compostela.

The sign of the Camino is a shell, printed on your bulletin—displaying all the trails that span out from the one destination. Those that walk the Camino are called pilgrims. Pilgrims are set apart in Europe as they journey—they are protected, they are cared for, they are revered. When you pass someone on your Camino, someone greets you by saying “buen camino” meaning “have a good journey.” ma

This grand destination is believed to be the final resting place of the bones of fisherman, disciple and friend of Jesus of Nazareth, St. James. Christian tradition has it that in AD 44, his martyred remains were brought to Spain from Jerusalem, where he had been beheaded. James had been the first to evangelize on the Iberian Peninsula before returning to the Middle East. The location of the tomb was lost from memory until, in the ninth century, a shepherd called Pelayo is said to have rediscovered it. He followed a shower of stars into a field, giving the site the poetic name of Santiago de Compostela, or St James of the Starry Meadow. From that time onwards, people were drawn to pay homage from all parts of the Christian world, making use of existing trade routes that ferried goods to and from the shoulder of Spain.¹

At its medieval peak, hundreds of thousands of people walked the Camino each year, but it didn't last. Pilgrimage to Santiago had its lulls in the sixteenth century due to the Reformation, wars and plagues. It wasn't until the end of the twentieth century that it was reimagined and reinvigorated for a more modern mindset.

Now, people make the pilgrimage to do the walk. To disconnect, to explore a different way of being in the world, to experience cross cultural exchange, to work through a loss or a season between jobs, to experience God and life in a new way. These sacred paths hold so much history and meaning.

In 1985, 2,491 pilgrims were recorded on the Camino de Santiago; by 1993, the number exceeded 100,000 and by 2024, nearly half a million.² Iain Tweedale, who leads guided Camino walks, believes the increase in pilgrim numbers is an expression of a desire to slow down and re-encounter an older rhythm, which has been lost in modern times.

What was once a place where deeply religious Catholics went from church to church in village to village making their way as many did before them to a mass in Spain is now an infrastructure of people navigating life, navigating their relationship with a greater power, and learning that life perhaps isn't what we always make it about.

Author Mary Colwell walked the Camino when the pandemic began, writes this about her journey--

¹ The Gathering Place by Mary Colwell

² www.followthecamino.com

“The outer journey from place to place becomes an inner journey from head to heart ... A quarter of the way through the twenty-first century, it seems many people are exhausted. Cracks are appearing, souls are running on empty, people are searching for connection and meaning.”

So much of our lives are full of things that we think matter—our kid’s activities, our retirement plans, our jobs, the success of the organizations we volunteer for or run. What I learned most on the Camino was that *life* is so much more about being human, compassion, soaking in the beauty of God’s creation, knowing that you do not walk alone. Just like Abraham, we do not take one single step in this journey of life alone.

This August and part of September, you will have the chance to walk with *me* as I share my reflections as a pilgrim on this sacred way. A way I *began* thinking was about the destination, and realizing the journey taught me more about life, God and being human than any book, small group, class or Bible study ever will.

As Janet plays our musical interlude, I’d invite you to read the lyrics of this simple hymn and reflect about your journey of life, the places you’ve been, the seasons you’ve lived through—and think about the ways that God has made sure you’re not alone—was it a person? a special memory? a simple sign?

And if you’re in a season where you’re struggling to see that, say a short prayer that God may open your eyes to the reality that indeed you are held, and step by step God is leading us all. Thanks be to God for that.

Indeed, Step by Step, God leads us on our way—like Abraham we are blessed to be a blessing—that by sheerly living our lives and following God as disciples, the world may know God’s everlasting love and mercy. Let us stand this morning and sing as we dedicate our lives, our monetary offerings, and our very selves to the reconciling work of God in this world.