

Never Alone

A part of the sermon series “*Along the Way: Reflections from the Camino Portugese*”

Preached by Rev. Ridgley Beckett on September 7, 2025

Exodus 13:17-22; Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Our summer sermon series is called ‘Along the Way,’ following my sabbatical journey this winter on El Camino de Santiago—the Way of St. James. Most pilgrims walk a Camino, but I traveled by bike over 200 kilometers from Porto, Portugal to Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

If you’ve never heard of El Camino de Santiago—It is a pilgrimage one makes to a city in the northwest corner of Spain in Galicia to pay homage to the remains of the Apostle James, who was believed to be responsible for the spread of Christianity to the Iberian Peninsula. There are a framework of these medieval trails that all lead to the same place—a cathedral in Santiago de Compostela. What first began as a strictly religious pilgrimage, now draws people from all over the world, from many religions and cultures. Over the years *why* people do a Camino has changed—they don’t always do it for religious reasons-- but there is one thing for sure: God is all over the place on these trails—in the land, the people and stories shared along the way.

My first day on the Camino was spent getting acclimated and comfortable with the idea that I had committed to journeying by bike in a foreign country, alone. After a near accident, I started looking for respite and discovered many locked up churches along a route that was known for religious spaces for rest. Instead, where I found God was in the care of 3 volunteer ‘hospitaleros” in a pilgrim hostel. I was greeted warmly, tended to, fed and welcomed with radical hospitality. It reminded me I was just where I needed to be and that God had set me on this sacred trail for a reason.

Day three started gloomy and didn’t get any better. I wasn’t able to ride due to weather and after having to take transport to the next village, I discovered that I had started my journey the week a tropical storm hit the coast of Portugal. The next day in the early morning hours, I noticed a break in the storms and a bearable wind forecast, so I dug deep into the part of me that is stubbornly resilient and insisted I was going to keep riding, despite the weather. I discovered strength I didn’t know I had, and along the way, I was graced with glimpses of light. Even in the rain, God provided provisional routes and kept me safe from the elements and flooding. My Camino wasn’t what I expected, but it was unfolding the way it needed to.

That evening, I arrived at my hotel in a fortified village-- it felt idyllic. Cobblestone streets, and grassy hills to climb and overlook the river valley. From the hills I could see a castle in Tui, Spain. Almost half-way there. For the first time in 48 hours, I felt settled. I celebrated with dairy free gelato from the corner store—thanking God for sweet treats and small victories.

Overnight, I could hear thunder, lightning and hail outside my window, but it didn't seem as daunting or loud as the previous time. By then I had become skilled at staying "dry-ish"—plastic bags on my feet, a hat under my helmet, layers packed tight in panniers. When I set out the next morning, the rain had broken. I was greeted with a chill as I left the hotel and got on my bicycle. "I'll take cold over rain any day" I thought. Sunlight spilled through the clouds, pointing me toward the road ahead.

After several wrong turns and circular routes trying to get out of the fortress, I found my way to a bridge that took me across the Minho river into Spain. It seemed Pontevedra—this region in Spain—was almost different. The terrain, the style of the homes, the signage. It was a day spent in cities, towns, and through farmland. The rolling hills became dramatic mountains, and the vistas were simply gorgeous. Along the side of the mountain, I could look out and see the coastal towns below. The day was long--it felt like 5 days in one. I found myself zoning out—no headphones, no music, just the sound of my wheels, pitter patter of rain (and sometimes unfortunately hail), and the rustling of the leaves.

At one point, I reached a trail marked with caution tape. Curious, I climbed over downed trees, only to find an endless swamp ahead. The rain had been so heavy the flooding still lingered in low spots. Water for as far as I could see--this wasn't just a situation where there was flooding, and it was possible to get through it—there was no end in sight to the high waters. Turning back, I rejoined other pilgrims who had reached the same impasse. We shrugged, and continued down another road, hoping we'd know what to do next. After some navigating and several right turns, another beloved provisional route with a yellow shell appeared, pointing us forward.

I came to depend on those little yellow shell signs, in the middle of an open field, on a path, cemented into the concrete in villages and towns, painted on underpasses and roads. Each one told me: *you're still on the way*. I trusted them completely, so much so that the second it led me to a place where I couldn't go forward I had to stop and really think about how to get back to these beloved shell signs. My arrival at the next village depended on it. The yellow shell guided me through these places and by these people I knew nothing about. It was almost like the Camino transcended it all. I trusted whoever installed these yellow shells. I didn't doubt it—just moved along knowing that it would guide me to where I was going, even though I had no idea. In the times when it seemed I couldn't continue due to the elements or my energy, knowing people had made this trek before along the way gave me a sense of encouragement—and endurance.

It made me wonder—who has been here before? Who were the first? Am I riding over rocks, dirt and grass of the ancient saints of the past? What were they walking for? What was going in their lives at the time? Were they alone? Were they people of faith? Soon, I approached the village of Redondela where my Camino merged with the Coastal Camino, and I started to see more and more pilgrims. We stopped at points and shared hellos, took photos, told our stories. As I journeyed on, the trail became more and more crowded with pilgrims, old and young. We were headed there, and we were heading there

together. Soon, I realized the truth of the phrase on the front of your bulletin “On the Camino, you are never alone.”

There are layers to this saying. Yes, you are always surrounded by people in the villages, pilgrimages on the path, and hospitaleros in the hostels. But you are also never alone because the roads you travel on, the struggles you endure, the hardships you face, the celebrations that bring tears to your eyes, are the very same places, experiences and situations others have gone through, and endured.

There is something truly sacred making a pilgrimage on land that so many others have before us, trusting something beyond ourselves to guide us along the way. I couldn’t help but think about this through the lens of our scripture readings today, especially in Hebrews.

The reading for us today shares a huge list of the people in scripture that make up “the great cloud of witnesses”. The saints named in Hebrews are like the yellow shells of our faith—small but steady reminders that others have been here before, that the path is trustworthy, and that God’s promises still hold.

Their lives, like those signs, guide us onward when we might otherwise give up. From Abel to the Maccabean Martyrs, Hebrews tells us of pilgrims on their way, embodying and bearing witness to the love of God through their faithfulness, their very lives, through their journeys. They relied on the promises of God through the painstaking times in their lives, when they didn’t know what was ahead.

The community that the letter to the Hebrews was written was one that was weary of living the Christian life--they had gone through many hardships like public ridicule, confiscation of property and imprisonment. Because of these hardships, some felt jaded and others avoided worship. Wondering if it was all worth it and sick of suffering and disheartened by God not showing up in the way they expected. They were struggling to see a way forward.

The author gives us and them a list of those in the Great Hall of Fame of our faith—to encourage them—to give them what it takes to get through: the foundation of those who have come before them. Their faithful acts were ones that didn’t bring about their fulfillment on the timeline they expected, but they hoped in something greater.

We can find hope in knowing that we don’t journey through this life alone—God has given us people along the way to remind us that we aren’t the first person to go through this hardship, and we won’t be the last. The way may sometimes seem daunting, but *you. are not alone.* You travel with the saints of years past who trusted in a God who walked with them on their way.

Friends, the God who led the Israelites with a pillar of cloud and fire through the wilderness is the same God who carried the weary community of Hebrews, is the same God who

guided me on my Camino through storms and provisional routes, and is the same God who leads us here.

To this table, to tangible signs like bread and cup, to remind us that the gift of faith is trusting that wherever we go, we don't journey alone, because the great cloud of witnesses, the faithful many before us have walked those roads we tread today.

On the Camino I learned to look for the yellow shells; here in worship we look to the bread and the cup. Both are signs that God is with us, and that countless pilgrims have been nourished by this same grace along the way.

These things tell us the story that God has gone before us, that God has paved a way of welcome for all, and that same God invites us here today, to taste and see that God is Good, even in the times we struggle to see it. And this God came to earth, healed, fed, and preached. He washed the feet of his friends and told them to be a living witness to the love of God by loving others, ensuring them that indeed there is room for all at God's table.

In the name of the father, son and holy ghost, Amen.