

Hearing and Heeding

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When I was a Bible Teacher at an independent day school, my boss, Suzanne, decided I should go to the Holy Land with the Riverside Presbyterian Church. I had absolutely zero interest in going on an international tour with a bunch of old presbyterians led by a minister who was stuffy as the day was long. However, the school funded the majority of the trip and gave me two weeks off of work in order to add a side trip to Rome, so I decided to go. I heard the call (from my boss) and heeded.

The tour company flyers for the trip advertised, “Walk Where Jesus Walked!” and “See Where Jesus Died!” and “Be A Pilgrim on the Via Delarosa!” I knew this was a bit of false advertising because I knew that Constantine’s mother Helena established these sites on her pilgrimage to Palestine in 326-328. She was responsible for the site of the Church of the Nativity (JC birthplace), the church at the Mount of Olives (ascension), the church of the Burning Bush in Egypt (???), and identified the True Cross that Jesus died on, which is where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built, among others. I was, for all intents and purposes, a skeptical pilgrim. But still, the call was loud, and I heeded.

I don’t know how the call to go on pilgrimage was sounded for the Ethiopian Eunuch in our text today. What propelled this African official in service to the Crown to embark on a holy journey to Jerusalem, the center of devotion for first century middle eastern Jews? He had wealth and privilege and education, a solid social standing in the Ethiopian courts. What was this person searching for, that they would leave all of that to ride over 1500 miles, crossing over deserts and prairies to seek a spirituality in a culture that scorned him?

In spite of holding a high place in Queen Candace’s court, the eunuch would have suffered widespread stigmatization in Gentile and Jewish society as a permanently emasculated, mutilated figure unable to procreate—in short, a threatening sexual anomaly in that culture.

However he stumbled upon Judaism as a spiritual path is beyond my imagination. His pilgrimage into *first century Judaism is fraught with roadblocks. Not only socially, but even in the very religion he was seeking to experience more deeply. He was “cut off” by the law from full participation in the covenant community, according to Deuteronomy 23:1*

A pilgrimage, by its very definition, is a journey to a holy place, which can lead to a personal transformation, after which the pilgrim returns to their daily life. It usually requires a leaving of home, of what is familiar.

I am filled with questions:

Why on earth is the Ethiopian Eunuch on a journey to a holy place where he will be rejected?

What happened when he was in Jerusalem?

Who did he meet? What encounters did he have with Divine Presence as a seeker?

What compelled him to spend a fortune on a rare, difficult to obtain, expensive scroll of the book of Isaiah?

What was he searching for?

On his way back to Africa, bumping along in his chariot in the desert, subjecting his expensive precious scroll to the elements of heat and dust as he puzzles over the words (I can't read in the car, so its hard to visualize reading a scroll while being driven in an open aired fancy cart.) It seems he is still seeking.... for something he didn't find in the holy city of Jerusalem.

But he seems to have found it on the road home in his encounter with Philip the Evangelist.

Philip (who was NOT one of the original 12 disciples we hear about in the gospels, but a different Phillip) was appointed as one of the special Seven Leaders in the early church. His role was to care for the poor in the Christian community in Jerusalem, and outreach in Samaritan Jews. Without getting into theology, let's just say Philip's ministry was to people who were teetering on the margins of life, barely "in" the circle of acceptance and usually falling out of it.

Philip was the perfect person with whom the Ethiopian could wrestle over the words of Isaiah. Big hearted, charismatic Philip who would chase down chariots in order to chat it up about God's big giant welcome to an ostracized "deviant" at the edges of "proper" society. Our Ethiopian is overcome by seeing and by being heard in all of who he is~~seeking, questioning, yearning, longing to be part of something bigger~a covenant community where he might be accepted. The encounter is so transformative that it is marked by water in the desert. Baptism.

Back to that pilgrimage in the early nineties to Israel-Palestine. I was right~~traveling with a bunch of old southern presbyterians was not my jam. No one wanted to grab a cab with me from the peaceful kibbutz in the country to check out the nightlife in Capernaum.

BUT~~ I learned a lot~~such as a lot of the Christian holy places were built over ancient Greek and Roman temples dedicated to Isis and Athena and Apollo. Queen Helena was quite the appropriator. This made me more irritable rather than spiritually fed.

One day, however, we were traveling through a country side dotted with hills and scrubby mountains. It was barren and tough and stark. As the bus tumbled through the hills, we read Psalm 121, over the loudspeaker:

I lift up my eyes to the hills and mountains—
 from where does my help come from?
 My help comes from the Lord,
 the Maker of heaven and earth.

God will not let your foot slip—
 The one who watches over you will not slumber;
 indeed, God who watches over Israel
 will neither slumber nor sleep.
 The Lord watches over you—
 the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
 the sun will not harm you by day,
 nor the moon by night.
 The Lord will keep you from all harm—
 God will watch over your life;
 the Lord will watch over your coming and going
 both now and forevermore.

Whenever I read that Psalm, I always imagined the writer looking at tall gorgeous mountains, like in Glacier Park, MT. Strong, still, imposing and yet warm and green and blue. Peaceful.

And yet, I realized, the Psalmist wasn't in Montana, but looking at the craggy landscape I was gazing at from the bus window with my fellow pilgrims.

It hit me—God was not always beautiful, but God was rugged, tough sinewy and scrappy like the untamed landscape I was gazing at. In that moment, I began to weep, because that was exactly the kind of god I needed to protect me, hold me, carry me~~especially when I got home and had to deal with a mess I left hanging in the balance.

The wild land was my Philip that day.
 The impenetrable, tenacious strength of the hills were what cracked me open and carried me to a wider, deeper, stronger sense of who God was in my life.

Friends, I don't know what or who is calling you these days.
 I don't know if you are being led to embark on pilgrimage~~but I hope you will consider the idea.

As a community and as individuals, we have been issued an invitation to the holy practice of pilgrimage beginning in the season of Pentecost, which is May 19th—the same day our sabbatical begins. When we applied for the clergy renewal grant to fund the sabbatical, the theme of pilgrimage was the anchor for writing that grant. The grant isn't just for my time away, but for your time as a congregation.

Christine Valters Painter, in her book, *The Soul of a Pilgrim* writes:

A pilgrimage is an intentional journey into the experience of unknowing and discomfort for the sake of stripping away preconceived expectations. We grow closer to God beyond our own imagination and ideas. Whether it be a physical trip or something

within requires a letting go. Pilgrimage calls us to yield our own agendas and follow where we are being led...”

I also believe strongly that no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, there is room for pilgrimage. Think of Abraham and Sarah, in their 80’s, setting out into the unknown, journeying to find a place to make a new land, create a new people~~all because Abraham heard the call from stars and angels and voices. Think of a know-it-all twenty something in the early nineties traveling with a bunch of presbyterians.

Need I say more?

Is there a call? Can you hear it?
Will you heed?
Amen.

SOURCES

*Deuteronomy 23:1 No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

Christine Valters Paintner, *The Soul of a Pilgrim: Eight Practices for the Journey Within*

Jodi Blazek-Gehr, *The Soul of a Pilgrim: A Benedictine Pilgrimage, Part 1, Being Benedictine*, <https://beingbenedictine.com/> [https://beingbenedictine.com/2019/07/07/a-benedictine-pilgrimage-the-soul-of-a-pilgrim-part-1/#:~:text=“A pilgrimage is an intentional,Journey Within, Christine Valters Paintner](https://beingbenedictine.com/2019/07/07/a-benedictine-pilgrimage-the-soul-of-a-pilgrim-part-1/#:~:text=“A%20pilgrimage%20is%20an%20intentional,Journey%20Within,Christine%20Valters%20Paintner”)

F. Scott Spencer, *Commentary of Acts 8: 26-40*, *Working Preacher*, April 28, 2024, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-acts-826-40-5>