

<2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24:1-10; Mark 6:14-29>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

"Friends, at this stop on your life's journey we bid you welcome with the hope that here you will find the love of God, which He offers to all who seek to serve and follow him!"

Pilgrimage is a wonderful word, especially in our faith tradition, and it carries with it so much unspoken meaning and import. I'm fond, as well, of words such as "coddiwomple," which means "to travel in a purposeful manner toward a vague destination," and "sojourn," which means "to stay or reside in a place temporarily." Both of these words, also, have meaning in regards to our spiritual lives. But pilgrimage means something so much more. In the context of our lives of faith, to be a pilgrim is to be one who "journeys to a sacred place," so to be on pilgrimage is to be, actively, on a journey toward not just a sacred place, but into the sacred presence of the Divine.

How often, in our day-to-day living, do we pause and consider ourselves to be pilgrims in this world, journeying toward a fuller realization of the presence of the Divine?

Nine and a half years ago I was traveling to the Holy Lands with a group of fellow clergy from the Richmond area. The trip was hailed as a pilgrimage - to see the sights and settings of our Scriptural heritage with our own eyes, and to be open to the leading of the Divine Spirit in the midst of it all. I took that understanding seriously; while I was excited to see the sights, and experience the modern-day culture, I journeyed with the desire to become more mindful of, more connected to the presence of the Divine, not just for that trip but for the fullness of my life. And while I was not the only one on that trip, I wish I could say that some of my colleagues had the same understanding and perspective, and shared my expectations.

I can clearly recall, going to The Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, said to be built around and on top of a grotto dwelling that was the home of Mary, at which she was visited by the Archangel Gabriel. This was the location - we could look into the home of Mary - where, upon hearing the proclamation that she would become pregnant and bear the Messiah, she responded with, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." The living space in which this transpired was in front me; I could look through the gate surrounding and protecting it and almost image the scene with my eyes.

That is, if I could get a good look at it. Because too many others, including some of my colleagues, were more focused on getting the best picture, from the best angle, and with the best lighting. I remember, in a moment of frustration, asking myself, "How can they truly be experiencing the impact of this place?"

I was on a pilgrimage, and I had my own expectations and understandings of what that looked like. But that did not mean that I should determine my experience, and the

meaningfulness of it, based on other peoples' actions. In truth, I wanted to - spiritually and metaphorically - to dance with the Divine while on my pilgrimage. On occasion, I was distracted from that. But it led me to understand and believe that The Divine - all three persons of the Holy Trinity - wants us to dance in our pilgrim lives, as well.

But we all know that there are different dances for different occasions. You're not going to dance a polka for a Celtic ceilidh. You're not going to do the jitterbug during a waltz. And if we are going to a) practice viewing our spiritual life as a pilgrimage toward the Divine presence and b) dance along the way, then we need to be mindful of a few aspects, including the reality that not everyone is going to hear the same music I do.

First though, I love that David danced before the procession of the Ark of the Covenant - the representation of the Divine Presence to the people of God - as it was making its way toward Jerusalem. As I read this story, my mind is filled with scenes of a joyful expression, a reality and deep-seated joy that runs so deep that David cannot help *but* to dance. And yes, there are other dynamics at play, such as David wanting to bring the ark to Jerusalem to help legitimize his rule and establish stability after an extended time of turmoil, but underlying all of that is the reality that to be in the Divine Presence evokes and brings about elation and joy. It's like a really good, favorite song that comes on the radio and you can't help but be moved by it, internally and externally.

Too often we get caught into a mindset that to take the spiritual life seriously is to be overly serious all the time. I've been guilty of that on any number of occasions, including in The Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. But to be too serious too much of the time is to miss out on the joy God has in store for us, for the communion of faith, for the fellowship we share with one another. It's not just the food that Presbyterians like to make when we get together, it's the celebration of joy we have with one another, and with God.

But not everyone sees dancing as the appropriate response, and that actually has little to do with the dancing itself. Rather, it has to do with how one person's expectations do, or do not, line up with another's. For instance, Michal, from our reading this morning, was more than displeased with David, and while we're tempted to think that it's just the dancing part, in the larger story she's upset about so much more.

But David wants to dance, needs to dance, because in his pilgrim journey toward the Divine, and as king leading a pilgrim people forward in faith, this is a joyful moment to celebrate, an occasion worth rejoicing over. And so he dances. As a pilgrim leader, on the occasion of bringing the Ark of the Covenant, the presence of God, and a sense of stability back to the people, he exemplifies the reality that celebrating is more than just acceptable. His joy stems from the fullness of this pilgrim stop in his life's journey. His eyes are focused on the bigger picture, and he can't help but be glad.

As pilgrims, if we are to be a pilgrim people, it is important for us always to keep the bigger picture in our mind's eye: the deeper awareness of, and understanding of, the full presence of the Divine in our lives and in our world.

That isn't always easy, and I think that's a lesson we can take from our gospel reading this morning.

Now, I've struggled with our gospel reading. I have a hard time trying to spin Herod and his actions in any kind of positive light. And I've wondered why Mark, the first gospel written, spends so much time recounting what Herod Antipas was like. The people hearing Mark's words certainly would have had no problem remembering and knowing who Herod was - a despot and corrupt leader who was set up as king of Israel by the Roman Empire so that he could be their puppet. No one needed the reminder of who Herod was, and yet we have this detailed story of how, exactly, he decided John the Baptist should die.

But I have a theory: this flashback of story-telling, sandwiched in the midst of Mark's recounting of Jesus' ministry, is not actually about Herod. It's about John. Because John would have understood the potential consequences of faithfully following the Spirit of God in the way that he did. The way he spoke, and denounced Herod, John knew what the outcome might be. Even though Herod enjoyed speaking with John and engaging in conversation, John had to understand what his own pilgrim journey might entail. And still, he went forward with it. The recounting of his death, and how it came about, as well as the reminder that his disciples kept his faith after his death, I believe is as more to uplift John's commitment to proclaim God's word, and how Jesus' ministry is echoing that. John was committed to his pilgrim work; he kept the bigger picture in front of him, and followed it with joy.

It's not always easy; following God, faithfully following in the Spirit, will not always be sunshine and cupcakes. But to do so, to do our best each and every day to be in a pilgrimage mindset, will bring us to joy - deep-seated and abundant joy which can never be taken by the sorrows of the world. And we are on a spiritual pilgrimage, all of us, individually and communally.

"Friends, at this stop on your pilgrim journey we bid you welcome with the hope that here you will find the love of God, which He offers to all who seek to serve and follow him!" I continue to pray for each of you in your own journey, in your pilgrimage toward God and the Divine, and I am excited for where God is leading us. Even in the potential unknown, and the anxiety that can produce, I am excited for us to be seeking to follow God, faithfully and committedly. It is a joy beyond measure, and I pray you are aware of it, as well. After all, we are invited to join the dance. Amen.