

## **The Practices of pilgrimage deepen our experience of worship**

**By Rev. Brad Berglund**

### **The Pilgrim Journey**

During the years 950 – 1200 C.E., hundreds of thousands of people around Europe were on the move. These weren't two week family vacations. This was pilgrimage — an excursion on foot that would stretch the limits of the strongest person. Charged with all the meaning of life and death, a personal pilgrimage was often dangerous and always strenuous. Potentially, it was the last act of a person's life.

People went for a variety of reasons. Some traveled to fulfill a vow. Others were doing penance for sins committed. Still others went for spiritual renewal and hope. Many wanted to be in a sacred site associated with a holy person. There were those who thought a pilgrimage would earn them favor in the next life and others who wanted to test their courage.

They went to a variety of places like Jerusalem, Rome, Santiago de Compostela and Canterbury. Associated with mystery, saints, the stories of Jesus, martyrdom or miracles, these holy places became symbolic of the journey of life toward some finality on earth and eternity with God.

Before leaving on a journey of this magnitude, pilgrims were given a ceremony of "leave taking." Often in the form of a mass at the local parish church, specific rituals of blessing gave the pilgrim strength and courage for the long road ahead. This ceremony gave appropriate recognition and importance to the transforming possibilities in that person's life.

In our day, pilgrimage is once again gaining in popularity. In our high tech, fast-paced busy world, perhaps there is a deepening need for meaning. Just by reading modern books and magazines, it's easy to see that people today are more globally aware and internationally connected than previous generations but business and entertainment travel is apparently wearing thin. In their longing for divine connection, people are discovering that time apart from routines and business pressure is necessary. A different quality of time is needed to heal our wounds, listen deeply to our lives and hear the voice of God.

Through pilgrimage, many people are rediscovering the transforming possibilities of the three-fold movement of all spiritual discipline — intentional preparation, mindful experience and purposeful integration. This pattern is a natural part of the spiritual practice of pilgrimage.

### **Worship as Pilgrimage**

This three-fold pattern is also the natural movement of communal worship. Like a weekly mini-pilgrimage, worship is an adventure, a journey into the unknown toward God. In this way, worship has flow and movement which needs to become personal.

Like a pilgrimage, this journey is not to be taken lightly. If worship is to be a transformational act, it needs thoughtful preparation, mindful experience and purposeful integration.

## **Pilgrimage practices for Worship**

### **1. Intentional Preparation:**

**Idea:** Set aside thirty minutes before you leave for worship to read the scriptures of the day and spend time in prayer. For busy people — especially pastors, church musicians, church school teachers and parents of young children — this suggestion will prompt an outburst of laughter. But before you dismiss it, give it a chance. Think about it. All week long we rush around trying to accomplish the day-to-day work of life. Bringing a sense of resolve and commitment to making the day of worship different is a challenging but rewarding task. Exchanging stressful details and routines with your own focused preparation will have a dramatic effect on your level of anticipation as you enter worship.

### **2. Mindful Experience**

**Idea:** Cross thresholds with care. For example, before you enter the sanctuary, stop at the doorway. Take a minute or two to prayerfully offer your life to God. As a sign of receptivity, open your palms in front of you. Allow that simple act to help you be fully present to the transforming possibilities of worship.

### **3. Purposeful Integration**

**Idea:** Before you go to bed on Sunday night, make time to reflect on the experiences of the day. Keep a special “Sabbath Time” journal next to your bed. Using a common illustration from your garden, jot some notes in these categories: Seed, blossom and thorn. 1. Reflect on those things you sensed had been “planted” in you today. What new insights, words, melodies or sights meant something to you today? What longings are beginning to grow in you? (seeds) 2. What came to life in you today? What is opening up in you? What gifts are you ready to share with others? (blossom) 3. And what caused you discomfort? What caused resistance, even pain in you? Where is that discomfort coming from? (thorn) This simple act of reflection deepens our Sunday experience and begins to integrate those things we experienced and learned about ourselves, others and God.

Adapted from the book, “Reinventing Sunday” by Rev. Brad Berglund (Judson Press)