

Introduction to Pilgrimage

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INTRODUCTION

A pilgrimage is, quite simply, a trip that is spiritually motivated. Pilgrims travel to sacred sites to follow in the footsteps of their spiritual fore-bearers, to encounter the divine, and to deepen their personal faith. Pilgrimage has a rich history and deep theological roots within the Christian tradition and beyond. This brief article will explore how pilgrimage has shaped the faithful in the past, reflect on the biblical and theological foundations for modern pilgrimage, and offer suggestions on how to travel as a pilgrim today.

HISTORY OF PILGRIMAGE

Pilgrimage is not a uniquely Christian endeavor. It is as old as human experience. Since humankind began dancing, making music, and telling stories, they have traveled to connect with some sacred realm beyond earthly existence. Cave paintings, megalith- and passage-tombs suggest that as long ago as the Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic eras (40,000 – 10,000 BCE), people traveled to connect with the sacred. Hindu holy texts dating to the 5th century BCE document pilgrimage sites. Among Muslims ancient and modern, *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) draws nearly two million people to Saudi Arabia where they circle the Ka'ba seven times, visit the mountains and holy well of Hagar, and feast together in memory of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son.

In the early church, Christians often made short pilgrimages to local sites associated with martyrs who had been killed for their faith. These early Christians believed that the remains of a martyr carried a special connection with the divine, either directly or by

mediating God's power. Many pilgrims traveled to shrines and tombs seeking physical or spiritual healing for themselves or their loved ones. Some also believed that these saints would intercede to God on their behalf, assisting to secure their eternal home in heaven.

Holy Land pilgrimage began in earnest in the fourth century as the Christian faith became of the faith of the Roman empire. Helena, mother of Constantine, traveled to Palestine in 326 CE to identify sites associated with the Scriptures. Relying on the Holy Spirit and the testimony of native people, Helena chose sites for Mt. Sinai, the birth of Jesus, Golgotha, and others. While few of these sites can be identified with modern scientific certainty, many of Helena's labels have stuck. Pilgrims have flocked to the same rock in Jerusalem for 1700 years, touching the crevice where the cross stood much like their Paleolithic ancestors touched the walls of caves to commune with the divine.

The fall of Rome in the fifth century and the Muslim conquest of Palestine in the seventh century nearly brought Christian pilgrimage to a halt. Many of the shrines built by the generosity of the empire-church were desecrated or destroyed. The Crusades were launched, in part, to reclaim these holy sites so that Christian pilgrimage might resume. In fact, the Crusaders of the 11th and 12th centuries conceived of themselves as pilgrims, though their mission differed greatly from that of their earlier counterparts.

In the Middle Ages, Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land resumed, fueled in large part by a Roman Catholic interest in relics, which could be used to purchase indulgences and reduce one's time in purgatory. A relic

might include a bone shard from an ancient martyr, a splinter of the True Cross, a chip off the rock where Jesus multiplied loaves and fishes, or even dust from the grave of a saint. Even without a relic, pilgrimage itself counted toward relief in the afterlife. Pilgrims not only traveled to the Holy Land for these relics, but to other shrines or locales associated with saints. The Way of St. James (*Camino de Santiago*) is among the most famous of these pilgrim routes, carrying pilgrims from France and Portugal to the burial site of St. James, brother of Jesus, on the coast of Spain.

The Protestant reformers of the fifteenth century frowned upon these pilgrim practices, calling them superstitious and unbiblical. Martin Luther first rebuked the church for abuses related to the sale of indulgences. Soon, however, the reformers rejected the notion of purgatory altogether. This, coupled with the idea that the faithful could pray without a saintly mediator undermined the theological foundation of relics and pilgrimage. The reformers also made more direct attacks on the practice of pilgrimage, directing their followers to care for family and the local poor rather than cavorting off to Rome or Jerusalem.

Today, the Reformation strait jacket on pilgrimage has loosened, and Roman Catholic ideas about the saints and the afterlife have softened. The faithful and the curious from both traditions and no tradition are reviving the practice of pilgrimage to connect with the divine in a way that simply seems more difficult, if not impossible, at home.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.
Deuteronomy 26:5

When God called Abraham in Genesis 12, he was in some sense calling him to become a pilgrim. “Go,” God said, “to the land that I will show you.” And Abraham went – without a clear sense of the destination, without a map or GPS device. Abraham traveled from his home in Mesopotamia, across the fertile crescent, into Canaan, to Egypt, and back to Canaan where he

died. Even in Canaan, however, Abraham was a nomadic herder. Like the Bedouin, he lived in tents that could be dismantled and moved to new location with better pasture or more abundant water. When God called a new nation into covenant, God called a wandering people.

Arguably, God called a wandering people because God is a wandering God. When Israel journeyed out of Egyptian slavery toward the Promised Land, God went with them in a pillar of fire by night and in cloud by day. After the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, God’s glory traveled the desert inside the Ark of the Covenant. The Scriptures provide elaborate detail on how the Ark was carried and by whom. To mishandle the Ark was to disrespect the Lord of heaven and earth. When the Israelites finally took possession of the land of Canaan, they desired to settle down in a proper city with a proper king. The Lord acquiesced to their desire, but with sharp warning about how settlement and government would transform this wandering people.

*How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord Almighty.
My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the Lord. . . .
Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.
Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.*

Psalms 84:1-5

After the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem, the glory of God was said to dwell there in the Holy of Holies. Pilgrimage to the Temple was a regular practice among ancient Jews, particularly for feast days like Passover or Sukkot. Psalms 120 – 134 are called Psalms of Ascent; they were sung by pilgrims as they made their way up to Jerusalem and the Temple. Since Jerusalem stands at a higher elevation than most of the Holy Land, a pilgrim going to Jerusalem is always going up, regardless of her direction of travel.

When God became incarnate in Jesus, he lived as one who had “no place to lay his head.” While Jesus came

from a particular place (Nazareth) and seemed to have a home base (Capernaum), he never had a home of his own. He and his disciples lived pilgrim lives: carrying few possessions, relying on the hospitality of strangers, walking everywhere they went, and celebrating the sacred in their midst.

Advocates of pilgrimage as a modern spiritual discipline no longer rely on promises related to the afterlife to motivate and inspire pilgrims. Instead, pilgrimage is valuable because of its ability to disorient and reorient the traveler. In leaving behind our routines, our schedules, and our familiar environs we have the opportunity to connect with ourselves, our neighbors, and even with God in new ways. That is not to say that these new connections cannot happen at home; however, the reality of our frenetic lives means they often do not. While God can be found everywhere, pilgrimage takes the traveler to the places where God has been encountered for centuries and disorients us enough so that we may encounter God there, too.

PRACTICES OF A PILGRIM

Never refuse an invitation, never resist the unfamiliar, never fail to be polite, and never outstay the welcome. Just keep your mind open and suck in the experience.

Alex Garland, "The Beach"

By the most basic definition, a pilgrimage is a religious journey: it must involve going somewhere to seek the divine. Some natural wonders and religious shrines are favored sites of pilgrimage because of the countless other pilgrims who have experienced God's power in those places before. But not all who travel, even to religious sites, are pilgrims. The difference between tourism and pilgrimage is in large part an attitude that is shaped by certain practices and disciplines. While some trips are more given to pilgrimage than others, almost any journey (including a trip to the grocery store) can become a pilgrimage if the traveler will set out to travel as a pilgrim, embracing the values of simplicity, hospitality, and openness.

SIMPLICITY

At its essence, the spiritual discipline of simplicity is about trusting God for even the most basic necessities of life. For the ancient pilgrims, it would have been impossible to carry enough supplies for the entire journey from Europe to Jerusalem. Every accommodation could not be booked in advance of the journey. There was no certainty about when you would arrive and whether you would make it home again. The things they did carry were thoughtful, and were blessed for the sacred journey: a wide-brim hat, a leather satchel for money and documents, a sturdy staff, a long thick cloak to double as a blanket, strong boots, and a water bottle.

For the modern pilgrim, simplicity is not about packing light as an end in itself. Charles Foster invites the pilgrim to ask of each item they plan to take, "Is that there to insulate me from what the journey has in store?" Since the journey is part of the pilgrimage, we ought to experience the journey in a physical, bodily way. Packing simply requires us to feel heat and cold, soreness and hunger. It is an opportunity to relate to the sufferings of others (not least Christ) and to meet God in our fellow travelers who may have a scarf, a band-aid, or a granola bar to share.

Another consideration toward simplicity is the schedule one hopes to keep. A modern pilgrimage to the Holy Land often comes with pressure to see and do too much in a few days. The pilgrim is wise to leave breathing room in the schedule. It is better to pray well in one locale than to offer hasty prayers at dozens of sites. If you can touch the hem of God's robe among Gethsemane's olive groves, perhaps a visit to the Via Dolorosa is not so important or could wait for another day. Among the things a pilgrim could leave behind is the checklist of "must-see" attractions. The main thing you are traveling to see or experience is the Holy One.

HOSPITALITY

Closely related to simplicity is the practice of hospitality both given and received. Early pilgrims would have covered 15 to 20 miles each day on foot, or up to 30 miles if they could afford a horse. At the end of the day, they would seek shelter in a hostel, monastery, or guest house. Benedictine communities were required

to receive pilgrims with the same hospitality they would show Christ himself. (In reality, pilgrims received hospitality according to their class: peasants, visiting monks, and high officials each receiving progressively better accommodations.) Pilgrims seldom traveled alone. There was safety in numbers: from thieves, wild animals, and rent-seeking innkeepers. Evenings were spent in the common area of the inn sharing stories or music among fellow pilgrims.

Semitic people (both Jews and Arabs) are famous for their commitment to hospitality. Abraham welcomed two strangers into his tent who delivered the news of Sarah's impending pregnancy. The book of Hebrews tells us that by welcoming strangers we might be entertaining angels. Arab shopkeepers routinely offer a cup of tea. While it may come with a sales pitch, you are welcome to sit and drink whether you will buy or not. The most hospitable among them might even invite you for dinner in his home.

Modern notions of pilgrimage often include some individualistic ideal of self-discovery or deepening faith. These may be part of pilgrimage, but they are scarcely won by the individual. Pilgrimage demands community. Solo pilgrims will find themselves drawn to other travelers, if for no other reason than for some needed aid or conversation. Pilgrims should listen for invitations not only from other travelers but from the locals in the land they visit. Simplicity in your schedule creates the space to accept these invitations and discover the secrets of a fellow human that no shrine can contain.

OPENNESS

Wrapped around the values of simplicity and hospitality is the pilgrim's call to openness. This begins with an openness in one's expectations. The pilgrim may set out with some preconceived idea of what he will see or accomplish. Often these ideas are fulfilled. However, some of the most significant moments come when the pilgrim is open to those things which cannot be planned: encounters with other people, encounters with his own soul, and encounters with God.

The posture of openness is primarily one of receiving. We are much less in control when we receive than when we give. To be open to the surprises and encounters of the pilgrim journey is to relinquish the need to be constantly in control of our own schedule, our own comfort, our own goals, and even our own narratives. When we are open, we can hear and receive the stories of others. When we are open, we can receive the experience that come to us. When we are open, we can accept the difficulties of travel without too much complaint. When we are open, we can accept the invitations that are offered. The counterpart to openness is gratitude.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Early pilgrims visited shrines and holy sites to improve their fate in the afterlife and connect with the power of God, often for healing or repentance. Why are you making a pilgrimage? What do you hope to accomplish?
2. Consider the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim. In what way are you more like the former? What would it take to adopt a pilgrim mindset?
3. Which of the pilgrim values is the most difficult for you to embrace? How could you begin to practice that discipline before your trip so that you can more fully travel as a pilgrim?

TO LEARN MORE

Charles Foster. *The Sacred Journey*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

James Harpur. *The Pilgrim Journey: A History of Pilgrimage in the Western World*. (Katonah, NY: Blue Bridge, 2016).

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