January 9, 2011
Matthew 3:13-17
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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The Way

On this Epiphany Sunday, we still have up many symbols we use during the Christmas Season – the crèche, the tree, and the star. Symbols are powerful resources. They tell a story. They convey a message. And when they capture the imagination they draw us in. Marketers know that very well. Who would have guessed that a simple swoosh sign would come to be recognized the world round as representing Nike, a sporting goods company. Or an apple with a bite missing would stand, not for Adam and Eve, but for Apple Computer.

In the church we have symbols for each season in the year. In this season of Epiphany, which means to be revealed, we use the symbols of the star, which led the magi on a pilgrimage to the Christ Child, and the waters of baptism, which invite us on a pilgrimage of faith.

Today I want to focus on the scallop shell as a symbol of baptism, and what I have learned recently about the significance of that symbol for Christian pilgrims in Europe. Last year we decided to start giving a scallop shell to each person as they were baptized as a remembrance of this special day in their lives.

Why a scallop shell? Some early Christian art shows John the Baptist using a shell to pour water over Jesus' head in his baptism. It is a symbol that is used throughout the church today, representing the living and moving water of baptism, which blesses our living and moving in the Spirit of God.
This symbol of the shell reminds us that in baptism we are entering a life-long pilgrimage to follow in the Way of Jesus. Baptism is not a one-day event; it is the beginning of a pilgrimage. In fact, the early church was sometimes called "The Way." Baptism was understood not so much as giving assent to a set of beliefs, but of committing oneself to a way of life, recognizing one self as a child of God, serving in the name and way of Jesus.

A convergence of the symbol of the scallop shell and a sense of being on "the Way" shows up in the Christian pilgrimage experience known as El Camino, the Way of St. James in northern Spain. I didn't know much about this tradition until our daughter, Karin, decided to spend this year studying in Santiago de Compostela, which is the destination for the Camino pilgrimage. My husband, Ron, and our older daughter, Lauren, and I just returned from spending a week with Karin in Santiago. We didn't walk the pilgrimage route, which takes several weeks, but we did visit the cathedral and were there for the celebratory mass for the ending of the Holy Year of 2010. It is designated as a Holy Year because it is a year in which the Feast Day of St. James, July 25, falls on a Sunday.

Today I want to take the time to share with you some of my reflections on what we learned about this tradition of pilgrimage in Europe and how it helps me to reflect on my own pilgrimage of faith.

The image of the scallop shell has for centuries represented St. James and is literally used on buildings, roads, fences, rocks, and whatever to mark the route that pilgrims walk along the Camino. This route has known pilgrims for over a thousand years, as they came from all over Europe, and now from all over the world, on their way to the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela where tradition says the relics of the Apostle James are located. In this region a walking staff with a scallop shell is a sign of a pilgrim.

Santiago is a city of about 95,000 people. It is not unusual for them to have more than 100,000 pilgrims arrive during the year. During this Holy Year they set a record of more than 270,000 pilgrims. That's about 740 a day, which helps to explain why there were four pilgrim masses at the cathedral each day this year.

Why do people walk the pilgrimage route? For a variety of reasons, I suspect: some simply for the physical challenge of walking day in and day out for several weeks; others for the excitement of meeting other people from all over the world; and some for the opportunities for spiritual reflection that it provides. What strikes me is that such a focused pilgrimage is a reminder of the reality that all of life is really a pilgrimage – with physical, social, and spiritual facets.

As I mentioned in my newsletter column for this month, the Women's Spirituality Circle here at FPC recently read a book by Joyce Rupp entitled, *Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino,* which tells of her 37 day experience of walking this pilgrimage in Spain. In the book she reflects on 25 life lessons she experienced. Today I'm going to comment on just three of those and how I experienced those lessons on our pilgrimage to Spain and how it reminds me of what is important on my life's pilgrimage as I follow in the Way of Jesus.

1. travel lightly
2. look for unannounced angels
3. walk in a relaxed manner

Travel lightly.
I don't travel that much, partly because I'm not a very good traveler, but I have traveled enough now to know the wisdom of traveling lightly. On the other hand when you think of monks who travel in certain parts of the world with only a begging bowl, then the carry-on suitcase and purse that I took on this trip was extravagant. And I guess in many ways it was. But for me it was a commitment to living a more minimalist existence. Even so I realized there were some things I could have done without. I can live with a lot less and actually be freer. And it was a gift to my back.

I must confess that I used technology to help me travel more lightly this time. I book an eBook device, which allowed me to carry several books and a collection of crossword puzzles all in a lightweight device, which fits in my purse. What a luxury!

I've noticed in recent years that I don't like having as many things around as I used to. Maybe it's because we have moved a number of times and all those things get heavy – physically and spiritually – when we keep lugging them around.

But, it's not just the physical things we lug around. It's all the other emotional and spiritual baggage we drag along as well. I find that being in a new and unfamiliar place brings some of those things right to the surface and forces me to see them more clearly. It makes we ponder how I might carry those things more lightly each day, so that I may be more free to be a pilgrim on the Way.

Look for unannounced angels.
One of the angels we met on our trip was named Russell. Our trip was delayed two days by the snowstorm over Christmas weekend. We had to get to JFK in New York and couldn't get a flight because everyone had rebooked. So we took the train, which as you may know requires a transfer in Boston. The Downeaster was late getting into North Station and we weren't sure we would make it to our next train. We've not made that transfer before and we're not savvy about the subway, which we needed to use.

As we stood up to get off the Downeaster Russell stood up too, also with an anxious look. It turned out he was trying to make the same connection we were and thankfully he had done it before. Out of the goodness of his heart he stayed with us, helped us buy subway tickets and shepherded us to the next train. We made it with two minutes to spare. Angel Russell was an important part of our trip.
How many times is there an angel Russell standing close by if I would just take the time to lift my head, notice who is around me and make a connection with that person? I wonder.

Walk in a relaxed manner.
Joyce Rupp says this advice came from an experienced pilgrim as a way to avoid blisters – to drink more water and walk in a relaxed manner.
Ron will tell you I don't have a natural inclination to walk in a relaxed manner. I tend to be purposeful and at times even driven in my strides, which is a great release of energy for me, but you sure can miss a lot along the way. Walking up and down the old historic cobbled streets of Santiago for a week helped to slow me down. I became aware of how the whole city walks – whole families, with infants in strollers, children on scooters, young adults in groups, parents with friends, and many older adults, including those with canes. I suspect having a daily two-hour siesta may help them to be more relaxed. Such a structured siesta encourages you to break cycles of over activity.

Walking in a relaxed manner gives us more time to notice what is happening around us and within us. Life is what happens when we are on our way somewhere. Walking in a relaxed manner opens up the outer and the inner world, inviting us to fully be on the Way.

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I had intended to stop here until the events of yesterday in Tucson, Arizona, and I was reminded that pilgrimages, like life, have great mountain top experiences and times in the valley of the shadow of death for us individually and collectively. The tragic shootings in

Tucson are a low time for all of us. Our prayers are for healing for Congresswoman Giffords and the others who were injured; for God's eternal love to encircle those who died; for compassionate embrace of the families of those who died; and I'm going to trust that God knows what to pray for the young man who carried the gun.

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May we learn to travel more lightly, keep an eye open for angels, and walk in a more relaxed manner in the ways we interact with one another in the public arena as well as in our personal lives, trusting that Christ is our companion on the Way.