

Date: August 12, 2007

SUNDAY: Ordinary 19

SERMON: Living Life Forward

Text(s): Hebrews 11:1-4, 8-14; Luke 12:22-34

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How many of you have ever done something really special to celebrate an anniversary? Carol and I celebrated our 38th wedding anniversary this past week, although this year, we didn't do anything particularly special, unless you count going to see the latest Harry Potter movie as special.

But we have had some rather memorable anniversary celebrations. On our 25th anniversary we treated ourselves to an unusual driving vacation. It was our first year in France, and as we began to acclimate ourselves to our new surroundings, we found ourselves running across references to the medieval pilgrimage routes that originated in many parts of Europe and ultimately converged in the far northwest of Spain at Santiago de Compostela at the great cathedral of St. James there. One of the things we learned was that during the Middle Ages, it was the third largest destination for Christian pilgrims after Jerusalem and Rome.

After a little research, mostly done by my wife, we learned that people still walked those ancient pilgrimage routes on foot, whether out of religious devotion, or merely for the pleasure of seeing a good deal of Europe on foot. But that summer, since we didn't have three months of vacation, we decided to do it a little more comfortably and briefly by car— it only took us two weeks.

We did see many bona-fide pilgrims making the trek on foot, and they were of all ages. And all of them had the characteristic symbol of that particular pilgrimage either on their walking staff or fastened to the outside of their backpack or saddlebags. If you read my "trivia question of the week" in the church email this week, you already know what that symbol was—a large scallop shell. In fact, large scallops

are called Coquilles St. Jacques in French— St. James's scallops, because their shells have been associated with that pilgrimage for so many centuries. At the various way stations, most of which were centered on ancient churches, we saw people pausing to pray and refresh themselves both physically and spiritually before going on. Sometimes we joined them for prayers in the great cathedrals or the small, charming Romanesque churches that are common in southern France and northern Spain.

But none of those pilgrims had any intention of stopping permanently in any of those points along the way, not even in the larger towns where they might break their journey for several days to enjoy the local foods, get a few nights in a proper hotel or hostel, and rest their weary feet. Despite their charms, these towns and cities were not the destination the pilgrims sought. After enjoying the respite, they packed up and moved on. They were pilgrims after all, not settlers. The whole point was to get to their destination.

When we arrived in Santiago de Compostela, we were sitting, along with thousands of others, in the great plaza in front of the basilica of St. James, enjoying the sunshine. Near us was a young man, in his early twenties, who had obviously hiked the pilgrimage route. He was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, had his backpack under his head for a pillow, and his walking staff with his scallop shell by his side. He was lying back, looking weary, but completely satisfied, like he had accomplished a great feat, which he had. He had arrived. He had finished his journey, and now, he was relaxing, while contemplating the wonder of that magnificent building in front of him. I'm sure that if I had gone to that young man and asked him if he felt the destination was worth the journey, he'd have emphatically answered that it was. His face and body posture told the story.

My memories of that trip, and of that young pilgrim came flooding back when I read those words about Abraham and other heroes of faith who are mentioned in the eleventh chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews, part of which was

our epistle lesson this morning: *“By faith, Abraham stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. . . all these [heroes] died in faith without having fully received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth, for the people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one.”*

Pilgrims are people who seek a better country. They are people on a quest. They live their lives in a forward direction. The pilgrims who landed at Plymouth on the Mayflower were on a quest for a new world where dissent about religious belief was not a cause for persecution or suppression. Despite our claim to be the spiritual descendants of those pilgrims, a heritage reflected in our tendency to use the word “pilgrim” in naming our buildings and institutions and newsletters—Pilgrim House, Pilgrim Lodge, *Pilgrim’s Progress*—in fact, we, like most Protestants, have pretty much left the whole notion of pilgrimage to our Roman Catholic friends. The image of being pilgrims on a quest is not, for many of us, a particularly powerful one. Most of us, I suspect, have more of a tendency to be settlers. We want a settled existence rather than a transient or mobile one.

Those of you who have lived in Brunswick for quite awhile probably know that one of the requirements for the chartering of Brunswick as a town with its own municipal government was that it had to have a church with a “settled” minister, meaning that the minister could not be one of those Baptist or Methodist “circuit riders” whose headquarters were in the same location as their hindquarters—on the saddle of their horse as they rode from settlement to settlement carrying out their pastoral duties. Nope, we Congregationalists, having started out

as pilgrims from the old world where religious dissent was so frequently repressed, once we arrived at our destination in the new world, set about in determined fashion to become settlers, and we wanted our ministers to be settled as well. And of course, that parish church in Brunswick with its settled minister was our own First Parish Church.

The urge to settle is strong in most of us. We spend a good deal of time and energy and money trying to plant ourselves as deeply and as securely in this world as we can. And the way we often do that is to accumulate stuff. We build houses, we buy cars, computers, televisions, clothing by the ton, paintings, cameras, barbecue grills, wine cellars, books and vacuum cleaners, and dishwashers. We plant gardens and tend them lovingly for years until they reach our vision of what a proper garden should look like. And there’s nothing wrong with any of that, unless we love such things inordinately. All of these things are good in and of themselves; they either save us labor or give us pleasure, and there’s nothing wrong with either.

But the danger is that our sense of who we are and what our life is about can become so rooted in the drive to settle or the stuff we accumulate that we lose sight the larger meaning of our lives, a higher purpose, a different destination. Our horizons become lower; the stuff we accumulate, gradually becomes a wall we cannot see over. And even when settlers go on a journey, they tend to go as tourists—seeking new adventures, but always carrying far too much baggage and always returning home having accumulated even more stuff. I should know; the decorations and artifacts in our house are a record of our travels. Traveling is not what makes a pilgrim, you see. What differentiates a pilgrim from a tourist or any other traveler is the motivation for making the journey—the desire to reach a particular destination and the self-discipline to travel light and not anything to distract us from our quest.

That picture of the pilgrim in our epistle lesson, as someone who sets out on a quest for a better world, a journey that demands faith and hope and courage and perseverance, are reaffirmed in those sayings of Jesus which make up our gospel lesson today. *“Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will wear. . . Can any of you, by being anxious add a single hour to your life?”* (The answer to that question is obviously not; we can, however, as we very well know, take away many hours from our lives by living in anxiety. Cardiologists and psychotherapists are kept in business by our anxieties.) *“And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. Instead, strive for God’s kingdom, seek **first** God’s kingdom, and these other things will be given to you as well.”*

It will not come as a great surprise to most of us to discover that we probably fit Jesus’ picture of anxious settlers better than we fit the picture that the author of Hebrews paints for us. Most of us could probably write the book on anxiety, couldn’t we?

Think of all the things we have to be anxious about— collectively as well as individually: the downturn in the stock market, the war in Iraq, the dwindling supply of oil, global warming, the state of our bridges, whether or not Iran has nuclear weapons, whether we’ll be able to afford a college education for our children, whether our children will ever get through adolescence to adulthood safely, whether we’ll even find a mate with whom to have children, whether we’ve inherited genes from our parents or grandparents that are going to predispose us for cancer or heart disease, whether our retirement savings are adequate— the list could go on and on, couldn’t it? Certainly enough good reasons for us to have our share of anxious moments.

Very few of us can simply shrug our shoulders in the face of all these reasons for

being anxious and say, “What, me worry? It’s fine for Jesus to talk about God feeding the birds and clothing the lilies, but God isn’t the one whose retirement fund is in jeopardy, whose marriage is unraveling, whose job is at risk, whose health is fragile. Besides, birds and lilies can’t worry. We can. And do.

The Scots poet Robert Burns, in his famous poem “To a Mouse,” sums up our predicament very neatly, when after stating famously that “the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray,” he says to the mouse,

Still, thou art blest compared wi’ me.

The present only toucheth thee;

But och! I backward cast my e’e

On prospects drear!

And forward, though I canna see,

I guess an’ fear!

Guessing and fearing seem to be the watchwords of our lives, don’t they? They are the habits of mind and spirit that we learn in “the school of hard knocks.”

If anxiety is the natural companion of the settler, hope is the natural way of being for the pilgrim. Hope always looks ahead in faith rather than behind in nostalgia for the destination we seek. Faith and hope takes the guessing and fearing—the anxiety— out of the future. Which is what I think St. Paul means when he says, *“We are saved in hope.”*

But, how do we replace anxiety with faith and hope? Faith isn’t a matter of believing in certain propositions or doctrines. Faith is a “habit of the heart,” a whole disposition of life. Faith, in the true sense that both Jesus and the writer to the Hebrews use it, means trust. Trust in God. Trust of ourselves and our future to God’s care. Trust in God’s love and the ultimate triumph of that love, even in the midst of uncertainty, hardship, or disaster, none of which we are spared, but through all of which we may come through without ultimate harm. *“By faith,*

Abraham obeyed when he was called; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith, he and Sarah, even though they were old and barren, received the power of procreation because they considered God faithful who had promised.” That’s the first key to living by faith rather than by anxiety: we’re not asked to just trust in fate or in luck. We’re asked to trust the living God to be faithful to the covenant with the creation. It is God’s character and promises to which we’re asked to entrust ourselves.

And how do we know whether God’s character and promises are trustworthy, especially when there aren’t that many evidences of it around? At least if there are, they are not the things that the media report. It’s the bad news we hear the most. So how do we know whether God is trustworthy or not?

Well, we have the testimony of witnesses to help us. We have the witness of ancient communities of faith-full men and women preserved in the scriptures sacred to our tradition. We also have the witness of other Christians through the ages, and of people we know more intimately, a grandparent or a family friend or a parent whose life has been an example of living by faith rather than by anxiety. The testimony of witnesses is not proof that delivers us from the need to decide for ourselves. But it helps us know that others had made the decision of faith before us. Ultimately the nature of faith, as trust, is such that we can only really know whether our trust is well-placed when we actually take the step of trusting someone. That’s why faith, as trust, always entails vulnerability and risk. The trustworthiness of God will only be discovered when we take the risk and give our trust to God.

If the first key to freedom from anxiety is to give our trust to God, the second is that we have to keep our destination firmly in mind. That destination, as both our writers tell us is the kingdom of God— a world of justice and peace that is the result of faithful people living justly and lovingly toward others. “*Seek first the*

kingdom of God and God’s justice,” says Jesus, *and all these other things— all the things necessary for life— will be yours as well.”* The testimony of all the great trusters, all the great people of faith, is that genuine faith, genuine freedom from anxiety, is almost never validated in the short term. Even Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, those great trusters did not fully see the realization of their faith, our writer says, *but they looked forward. . .”* The goal, the endpoint toward which our faith is directed is not the provision of our needs in the short term, but our participation in God’s ultimate plan for the whole creation. It is that future toward which we journey now.

John Bunyan, the “blasphemous tinker” as he described himself, who became, after his conversion, one of the great trusters and witnesses of the 17th century, and the author of the spiritual classic *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, put it this way in the words of a hymn he composed and which we will sing in a few moments:

He who would valiant be ‘gainst all disaster,

Let him in constancy follow the Master.

There’s no discouragement will make him once relent

His first avowed intent

to be a pilgrim.