

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

SHERARD EDINGTON

Mark 11:1-11

If you were to ask the average American to define the word **pilgrim**, then he or she would probably tell you about the first Thanksgiving and the Mayflower and the Plymouth Rock and those people who came to this land seeking religious freedom. But that's not exactly accurate because although we call those people pilgrims, they weren't pilgrims in the strictest sense of the word. They were settlers, colonists, religious refugees.

What sets pilgrims apart is that true pilgrims purchase round-trip tickets. Their intent is to travel to a location and then return to their homes. Those people who came over on the Mayflower in 1620 never intended to go back. They were looking for a place to settle.

The word pilgrim denotes someone who travels to a shrine or holy place as a devotee. It could be a Catholic going to the shrine at Lourdes, or a baseball fan traveling to Cooperstown. The word pilgrim comes from two Latin words—*per* which means “through,” and *ager* which means “land, field.” *Pererger* means literally “through the land,” and was used to describe someone who traveled abroad. Later, it meant “foreigner.” Over the centuries, the word mutated from *pereger* to the English word pilgrim.

Sadly, our modern Christian faith has lost the notion of a pilgrimage. It's not something that we think about doing as central to our lives of faith. There are plenty of pilgrimage sites around the world which include great cathedrals, shrines, and holy places. But taking a pilgrimage is not a discipline that we normally follow.

For people of the Muslim faith, pilgrimages are integral to their lives. Muslims follow the Five Pillars of Islam. And one of those pillars is the Hajj. The Hajj is an annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, which is the holiest city for Muslims. Hajj is a mandatory religious duty that must be carried out at least once in their lifetime by all adult Muslims.

For my upcoming sabbatical, I will be traveling to Greece. There, I will be part of a tour that follows the footsteps of the Apostle Paul to places such as Athens, Thessalonica, Corinth, Delphi, and other locations from the New Testament. I will treat this trip as a pilgrimage.

But why Greece? Well, I've already been to Rome, as well as the Holy Land of Israel, plus the Presbyterian Holy Land of Scotland. So, Greece falls next on the list.

Our reading for today comes from the gospel of Mark and tells of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as part of a parade of pilgrims. We call it Palm Sunday, but for the Jews of the day, they were making their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

In Jesus' day, Passover was one of the three major religious observances of the Jewish people. Jews from all over the known world would make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a week of worship and prayer, of celebration and fellowship. For many, this would be their first visit to the big city and the first opportunity to worship in the great temple.

Jesus and his disciples had traveled to Jerusalem from Galilee and are just a few of the thousands of people converging on the holy city.

Just outside Jerusalem, at the small village of Bethphage, Jesus sends two of his followers into the village with the cryptic instructions to locate a colt that has never been ridden. If anyone attempts to stop them, they are to say simply, *The Lord needs it.*

The disciples retrieve the animal as instructed. They place their cloaks on the animal as a sort of saddle and Jesus sits on the animal.

Then, Jesus and his disciples merge with the crowd as it streams toward Jerusalem. Jesus rides the colt. Joy and excitement propel the crowd in their journey. In their festive mood, the crowd takes notice of the man riding the donkey. And they get it. They recognize the image as described by the prophet Zechariah—[words we read at the start of our service]—the image of a king riding triumphantly into Jerusalem. *Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).*

Imagine that you are at a 4th of July parade and a figure dressed as George Washington appears. He is walking along behind a John Deere tractor covered in bunting and is in front of a group of eight-year-old baton twirlers who keep dropping their batons. As this man passes, the crowd shouts out, "Hey, George," and "Hello Mr. President." They salute and wave American flags. Now, no one would ever consider that this was the real George Washington, but they recognize that what he represents is why they are attending this parade.

It was the same with Jesus approaching Jerusalem. The people knew that he wasn't a king, but they cheered him on anyway. And they placed their own cloaks on the road and laid out leafy branches to create a sort of red carpet—a royal highway for this king. They are making themselves part of this pious tableau.

Although the people did not consider Jesus to be king, at the same time, they were also looking for a king—the king to deliver them from the hand of the Romans,

a king who would be the Messiah that they longed for. They cheered the man on the colt, but if he had ridden a great horse, like a warrior king, they would have rioted.

As they travel, the crowd sings from the Psalms, *Hosanna! blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

When we hear the word *hosanna*, we normally understand it be a cry of acclamation, like “hurray.” But it is more than that. It is a Hebrew word which means “save us.” These verses from Psalm 118 are words that were traditionally sung by pilgrims as they approached Jerusalem. With Jesus present, these words take on a deeper meaning. Save us Son of David. Save us king. Save us Messiah. *Hosanna to the Son of David.*

The story of Palm Sunday, as we read it here, is really a story of pilgrims—people traveling to the holy city of Jerusalem in order to worship. Yet the irony is that these pilgrims who cheer Jesus entering Jerusalem are the same ones, who, in a few days, will reject him and shout for his crucifixion. Sadly, they failed to see God in their midst.

And it makes you wonder. Were these people pilgrims or simply tourists? Were their hearts open to the possibility of God's presence?

So, this raises the question for us today, what kind of pilgrims are we? As Christians, we don't need to travel to a foreign place to be a pilgrim. According to the first Letter of Peter, he writes, *I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.* In other words, the writer of this letter, is calling his people to act as foreigners in this world and abstain from the sins of this world. Believers are to remain distant from earthly matters.

As pilgrims, we must adopt a mindset that recognizes our earthly existence as transient. We are not here to accumulate wealth, fame, or worldly achievements. Instead, we hold everything loosely, knowing that our true treasure lies beyond this life.

As Paul writes to the church in Philippi, as followers of Christ, *our citizenship is in heaven* (Phil. 3:20). And in the gospels, we read the words of Jesus who said, *My kingdom does not belong to this world* (John 18:36).

As Christians, we should adopt the attitude of pilgrims—of visitors simply passing through this foreign land. Our home is God's kingdom, *our citizenship is in heaven.* That does not mean that we are to ignore the world. No. Our mission is to engage this world—to make disciples, to demonstrate the kingdom of God, to share the good news. We are to be apart from this world. And we can only do this through the power of the one to whom we shout, “save us.”

I'm reminded of a wonderful story involving the author, Mark Twain. Twain once related a conversation he had with a businessman, who said to Twain: "Before I die, I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land where I will climb Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud at the top."

"I have a better idea," suggested Twain. "You could stay home and keep them."

To be a Christian pilgrim does not depend on where we go, but who we are when we go there.

And finally, I would like you to think of our time here each Sunday as mini pilgrimages. You travel from home, you come to this sacred place for worship, and then you return home. What you find here should be different from what you find out in the world. Our experience here should be set apart from what we find out there. When I go to Greece, I expect something remarkable to happen. When you come here, you should expect the same thing. You should expect to be changed.