

Pilgrim's Walking Sermon Series
"The First Step"
Genesis 12:1-5, Mark 10:17-27
Rev. Joy Laughridge
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Today we are starting a new sermon series called *Pilgrims Walking* that's going to last for the whole month of September. I'm looking forward to this sermon series because it gives me a chance to share with you some about my summer activities but also because the experience that I had on the Camino helps illustrate so many aspects of being a follower of Jesus, and we can all benefit from listening to what God has to say to us about that.

I know I had a unique experience this summer, and I realize that participating in a pilgrimage like the one I did is a gift and a privilege and not everyone gets the chance to do something like that, but a key idea that's at the heart of this series is that even if you haven't been on a pilgrimage or never go on one like the one I went on this summer, anyone can be, and many of us already are, *pilgrims walking* as we follow Jesus and make our way through life in this world. Discipleship is our pilgrimage and that's what I want to talk about in these sermons starting today by talking about the first step.

We all have to make our way through life. If you were born, it's a journey you just have to make, and once we're here, we find out that there are a lot of different options and ways we *could* go, and sometimes it can seem difficult to figure out which way is really the best path. With all the choices and options, figuring it out and finding our way can sometimes feel challenging. You wonder, am I doing the right thing? Is this the right choice? Or sometimes as you experience the consequences of a bad decision you know for sure you didn't get it right that time.

Sometimes we wish that there were clear markers along the way like the ones that marked the way for me and my fellow pilgrims on the Camino. Sometimes it was a yellow arrow painted on a post or on the ground that you could miss if you weren't paying attention, and sometimes there were more obvious stone pillars with the Camino seashell symbol on them. There were times when it was possible to stray away from the right trail so we were careful to look for the markers and pause to consult the map on the app if we were ever unsure.

We don't always seem to have obvious road markers like that as we go through life, but we'd like to because we want to be going in the right direction, and even if a person doesn't articulate it exactly this way, I think deep down inside everyone wants to find the path that ultimately leads us back to Eden. We long for communion and connection with our Creator. We want to be whole, and we want to live in a world free of brokenness and corruption. If we can get on the road that leads to *that*, that's the road we want to be on.

Well, you came for the good news today, and God does have good news for us. The good news is that as much as we want to find the path that will lead us home, *God* wants us to find it even more. God doesn't want to see us flustered and floundering around, chasing dead ends, and walking in circles. Have you ever done that when you got lost? You realize, shoot, those three turns I just took brought me right back to where I started! That's not what God wants for our lives. God wants us to arrive at home as much as we want to arrive at home, and, in fact, God wants us to find the way *so much* that God takes the initiative, and calls to us, and God even gave us something like a yellow arrow in Jesus who is God with us in the flesh who came to *show* us the way. We see this good news beginning to

be revealed in our Old Testament Scripture reading this morning about Abraham.

Abraham was a man making his way through life. He had been at it for 75 years, and one day he is awakened to a thought. As we read it in Genesis, he hears what seems to be an audible voice calling to him saying “Go! Leave the people and what you know behind and go to the place I will show you.” Whether he heard a real audible voice or not, it’s clear that a new idea was stirred up inside him. It was the idea that there was something more than what he knew already and there was still another road to try than all the roads he had traveled up to that point. It was the thought that there was this one God who was reaching out to him personally, who was offering to show him, and lead him, on the way that would lead to the fulfillment of promised blessings.

In this story we see God finding and calling Abraham, and the point that I want to emphasize today is that Abraham *responds*. He responds to the voice. He answers the call and says, “I’m going to do it!” and he does. He steps out in faith, and that first step marks the beginning of his pilgrimage as a person who would trust and follow as God led him on the way that *God* knew would take him to exactly where he wanted and was meant to be.

In the story of Abraham’s call, we see that wonderful truth that God does initiate a relationship with people, and God does call out to people to get our attention show us where to go and what to do, but in the story *Abraham* also shows us an important truth about being a pilgrim walking God’s way for us, and that is that the pilgrimage doesn’t actually begin until you *take the first step*.

I first heard about the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage about 20 years ago when someone did a presentation about their trip at a

Wednesday night dinner at my church. I was moved and fascinated, and I thought, “I would like to do that someday,” but my interest and my curiosity didn’t make me a pilgrim. I did a lot of other things during the last two decades, but I didn’t actually become a pilgrim on the Camino until the morning of June 22 this past summer.

This seems to be the way that it sometimes is when the Holy Spirit begins awakening and drawing our hearts to Jesus. A person hears what Jesus is saying, and it sounds good and there’s some curiosity, maybe even agreement, but there’s also some uncertainty or hesitation about actually committing to Jesus and following him. We see an example of this with the rich young ruler in our Gospel passage this morning.

The man comes after Jesus asking how he can attain eternal life. He is a man who seems to be sorting through the options, trying to figure out which road to take in life that will take him to that destination that his heart longs to reach. I imagine that there was a reason that he approached *Jesus* with this question. Maybe like me hearing someone talk about the Camino, he heard someone talking about their own experience with Jesus and it piqued his interest. Maybe he’d had a chance to listen to Jesus teaching himself at some point earlier, but for some reason something was stirring inside that sent him to Jesus, and he was curious about what Jesus had to say.

The story begins hopefully, but it comes to a sad ending. The man asks about inheriting eternal life, and Jesus answers in an unexpected way. When you think about it, you can hear in Jesus’s words an echo of God’s call to Abraham. “Go from your country to the land I will show you.” It’s not that explicit because Jesus and the rich man are talking about money and commandments, but that’s the “country” that the man knows and understands. In this world, you make yourself happy with money which gives you the power to get

what you want, and you get what you want from God by following rules. Jesus invites the man to leave that way of thinking behind and follow him down a different way. It's an invitation to let his thinking be changed and to begin a brand new life. Jesus begins to show him the way to true and eternal life by inviting him to sell his possessions, but the man can't or won't do it, and he goes away sad. He never makes the step from curiosity to commitment.

The Gospel writers don't ever mention the rich young ruler again so we don't know if he ever arrived at a moment when he decided to step out in faith and follow Jesus down a new road. It took me twenty years before I took the first steps that made me a pilgrim, so maybe it took the man twenty years before he did commit and start the pilgrimage of discipleship. We don't know how his story turned out, but really, the question for us today is what is your story going to be?

Jesus says of himself in John 14:6, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me." He is the way to where we want to be and to where we are meant to be, and he reveals this to us and invites us to trust him, and follow him, and be his disciples. It's true that there are a lot of other ways we can choose to go, and it's easy to stay on the well-worn paths that we've traveled even when we know we aren't getting anywhere good on them. At least we know what to expect, but that isn't exactly the case when we decide we are going to walk by faith and let Jesus show us the way one step at a time. That's taking a step into the unknown, and we might feel nervous and hesitant about that.

I was nervous before taking my first step on the Camino de Santiago. I was excited. I believed it was going to be a good experience, but I was still nervous. I knew we were going to be walking 12-15 miles a day, and even though I trained, I hadn't done that before. We were told that there were going to be some very steep

parts of the trail, and I kept wondering, “how steep?” I was really nervous because I didn’t know what it was going to be like, and the night before our first hike I couldn’t sleep. I tossed and turned all night and ended up sleeping for about 2 hours. That made me even more nervous because I wasn’t sure I would be able to do it in the first place, and now I was going to be sleep deprived. I was nervous, but when the alarm went off at 4:30 am, I got up, put on my hiking shoes and my back pack, met my team, and despite my uncertainty about what was ahead and my own capabilities, I took the first step and that was the step that made me a pilgrim on the Camino.

If going on a pilgrimage that involves walking with Jesus, and learning from him, and practicing doing the things he tells you do, all while traveling toward home in God’s kingdom- if that is something that sounds compelling, if something inside of you feels drawn to go on that pilgrimage – that opportunity is available to you. God makes it available to each one of us, but we have to take the first step. That’s how we practice faith. The Camino ends at the Church of St James, and it’s James who reminds us that faith without works is dead. It’s through that first step of faith that we are changed and become pilgrims on the road of discipleship.

I know that many of us have already taken the first step, but even if we’re already following Jesus on the way, the decision to keep following, and to keep taking the next step is important. We do face the temptation while on the pilgrimage of discipleship to stray off the path and go in the wrong direction. Sometimes maybe we get distracted and miss the direction that Jesus is giving. Sometimes we might get tired and we see what looks like a shortcut that seems appealing. Sometimes the road ahead looks scary, and we aren’t sure that we want to keep moving. If you’re struggling today with the next step, know that Jesus remains with you. He is still calling you forward and promises to lead you and show you the way.

On the Camino you stop along the way for refreshment and nourishment at cafes or hostels and lodging places called Albergues. The barista or the host meets you there and they offer food, drink, and rest. For every pilgrim walking the road of discipleship, whether you're taking the first step today or you're already well along on the journey, Jesus is with us today to be our host and our Albergue. He invites us to come to his table where he is ready to provide the nourishment and refreshment that we need for the journey, and at his table, he gives us a glimpse of the home that is waiting for us when we come to the end of the journey. Amen.