A Path Unwinding

On this Epiphany Sunday, we enter into a season in the circle of the church year when we consider opportunities to shine the light of Love on our human condition even as we also appreciate the very gradual lengthening of daylight across the days of January. I invite you to join me in a spirit of prayer, closing your eyes if it helps you to be fully present. Holy, loving Spirit – we welcome the warm embrace of your presence as we enter into this reflective moment. We give thanks for the freedom to gather this morning – by live stream and on this land loved by First Nations and many others across time and where we are now weaving our way of community. Help us to hold ourselves open to your loving power – a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Friends, have you ever been on a pilgrimage? Perhaps, like me, you have never used the terms pilgrimage to describe a venture undertaken. Both of our readings for today make references to pilgrimage. In short, it is a purposeful journey toward and return from a specific destination. Maybe not every road trip we've taken has been a pilgrimage, but some are.

If you have ever planned a trip to see a special site of significance, took it in with all your senses, and then considered its impact on you as you traveled home, you have been a pilgrim.

If you have had the opportunity to go on a retreat or educational event that took you away from your normal patterns in order to learn something new that you might incorporate into your daily life, you have been a pilgrim.

If you have ever paused to really hear a question or concern you've been carrying, took it with you as you stepped out the front door to walk in your neighborhood or started to shovel or snow blow the driveway, and stuck with the thought until a bit of new insight shifted your perspective and lightened the mental and emotional load even a little bit, you have been a pilgrim.

Now, I might be making it sound as though any journey can be a pilgrimage. And that might be true. However, several qualities indicate the path of a pilgrim. They include the setting of a clear intention, traveling toward and returning from a chosen destination, and openness to growth along the way.

Our readings for today invite us to consider pilgrimage as a pattern we might try for a first time, choose from time to time, or adopt as a way of life. Our world needs more pilgrims who travel with clear intention, aware of the path both toward and away from a destination, open to growth along the way. Pilgrimage can bring out the best in us – a mix of humility, courage and tenacity.

We clearly need more of us to adopt the posture of a pilgrim in this new year, because pilgrims can collaborate and lead. We are experiencing an apparent and appalling leadership vacuum in our federal government. Instead of pilgrim leaders (strengthened in wisdom through the arduous efforts of journey), we are observing humans who (seemingly compelled by fear, loathing and insecurity) are reacting aggressively. There is nothing powerful or strong about pillaging the land of far-away neighbors, kidnapping a hardworking nearby neighbor, or financially strangling our nearby neighbors. Attempts to control others are acts of cowardice in response to fear, loathing and insecurity. They are not power.

Jesus, our model for faithful living, did not play nice with insecure tyrants. He resisted them with the power of love.

I wonder, in this new year, how will each of us embrace the pilgrim journey of faith in the way of Jesus?

What circumstances in our shared public life AND within our personal relationships or endeavors are calling us to the fierce humility, courage and tenacity of the pilgrim way?

I am energized by the way our congregation is taking a leadership role in actively fostering social justice in the St. Croix Valley through Community Collective. If you have not yet attended one of our monthly gatherings, I encourage you to consider attending this coming Thursday evening. Community Collective is not a faith-based initiative. It is actually populated by more neighbors from beyond our church membership that from within us. The foundation for our work is our ethical common ground – a burning desire to pursue dignity for all.

And as I begin to prepare for our summertime sabbatical, I am drawing on the framework of pilgrimage to design my plan for professional development and personal growth experiences while I am away from here during the summer months. I look forward to working with church leaders to frame the congregation's experience of sabbatical through the lens of pilgrimage as well.

Let's turn to our readings for today to notice moves the magi made throughout their pilgrimage. Perhaps they can inspire us in the pilgrim journeys we are facing.

Humility is a strong virtue that shows up in multiple forms in this story. Jan Richardson writes of humility as openness:

"Call it one of the mercies of the road," she writes,
"that we see it only by stages as it opens before us,
as it comes into our keeping step by single step."

And she names the pilgrim's vow in the beginning of a journey:

"to rely on more than the map;
to heed the signposts of intuition and dream;
to follow the star that only you will recognize…"

Humility also shows up in the form of being teachable – of learning from our mistakes and false steps and learning, with the magi, who and how to trust and who and how to resist.

The magi were inspired by the prophecy of another culture – to the extent that they wanted to pay homage (to offer deep respect and honor) at their destination (in a place very unknown to them. And, as they arrived, we heard how they asked around – they asked the people of that space for signposts. And they noted Herod's state of being anxious in his search for information and then wishing to control things. They could read his palpable fear and insecurity.

Jan Richardson also writes of **tenacity**:

"to press on beyond distractions
beyond fatigue
beyond what would tempt you from the way…"

Because, "*Then the star appeared,"* she writes – *"the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered…"*

The magi pursued their destination with tenacity. They didn't give up, even with the missteps.

And finally, Jan Richardson writes about **being fully present** –

"to the place where at last you will kneel
to offer the gift most needed—
the gift that only you can give—
before turning to go home by another way."

We heard that echoed in the gospel reading as it said, "*They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!"*

And, "*In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route…"*

Part of pilgrimage is making sure to be fully present as we arrive and as we being the return journey – carrying with us what we have gained, what we have learned.

I invite you to close your eyes an hear these key aspects of pilgrimage as you consider which journey is most calling to you to pursue with humility, tenacity and full presence this New Year.

Google AI describes pilgrimage as a sacred journey and offers these five key aspects of pilgrimage:

"Spiritual Purpose: *To find grace, answers, healing (physical, emotional, spiritual)…"* Are you called to spiritual purpose?

"Sacred Sites: *Journeys to places significant to a faith, like [a] holy land, [a] shrine, or [a] site…"* Are you called to a particular destination?

"The Journey: *[It] often involves physical exertion (walking), leaving daily routines, and stepping out of [your] comfort zone."* Are you called to the effort of journey?

"Transformation: *[Pilgrimage] [a]ims for personal renewal, reflection, and a deeper encounter with [your] faith."* Are you called to transformation?

And finally, "***Community:*** *Can be undertaken alone or in groups, fostering fellowship and connection."* How are you called to pilgrimage in this community?

May we enter this New Year with humility, tenacity, and openness to being fully present to our experiences – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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Matthew 2:1-12, "For Those Who Have Far to Travel"