

Christmas 2, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today
in the New York Times travel section
there was an interview
with the title
“Why walk?”
It was with Robert McFarlane
who has written three books
on the connection between landscape
and human experience. His first one
“Mountains of the Mind”
focusses on the human attraction
to climbing mountain peaks;
the second “The Wild Places”
a search for wilderness in the midst of domesticated Britain.
But it is his most recent book,
“The Old Ways”,
that is the focus of the interview.
In it,
he talks about the experience of walking,
not just the everyday steps we take from the house to the car
or around the block with the dog,
but the deliberate action of walking on traditional pathways
as an act of pilgrimage,
where, he says, walking becomes for many people
“a means of making sense of themselves and of the world.”

Tomorrow
in the church’s calendar,
we celebrate
the Feast of the Epiphany,
when we remember
the coming of the wise men
to see the infant Jesus.

Tomorrow is the day, when by tradition,
the kings are finally placed
in the manger scene;
today

they are just outside,
perhaps,
if we follow the story as the gospel of Matthew tells it,
they are stuck in Jerusalem
meeting with King Herod,
waiting for his advisors
to come back with some evidence of where the child is,
searching
for the one that they have seen prophesied in the stars.

Usually, when we think about the story of Epiphany, the story
of the kings
we focus on the most tangible part of it,
those three gifts,
gold,
myrrh, and
frankincense,
gifts of great value,
and we ask ourselves
what would we give him,
what do we give him,
the Lord Jesus,
lying in the manger.

But sometimes I wonder
if that's not a distraction
from the other part of the story,
the part that, I suspect, is more like our own lives,
that journey in search
of the Savior.

Because that's a journey
that each and every one of us here
has some experience of.
It's the very nature of Christian faith:
to search for
an encounter
with God.
Whether in prayer, in scripture, in the Eucharist.
Our lives
are a search
for God.

St Augustine, perhaps the greatest of the theologians of the early church, said it this way:
 "God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you."

Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century Christian philosopher took it a step further when he said,
 "There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus."
 And both of them echo our Psalm today,
 "My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD;
 my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God...
 Happy are the people whose strength is in you!
 whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way."

We are on a search for God,
 a journey
 a pilgrimage,
 that will not end
 until finally we meet God
 face to face,
 and like the kings
 will be able to kneel
 and pay him homage.

And of course,
 as scripture constantly reminds us,
 we will not meet God
 in all his fullness
 until after we have died,
 and been raised;
 then we will see him
 face to face.

But until then
 we are on a journey,
 seeking experiences of the Spirit,
 encounters with the holy,
 glimpses
 of God.

A few months ago,
 I was talking with our bishop
 just after he and his wife
 had walked the Camino de Santiago de Compostela,

the pilgrimage way of St James
 from France
 to Compostela in Spain,
 five long weeks of walking.

And we were talking about how often we use the language of a journey or pilgrimage
 to talk about the Christian faith - just as I'm doing today.

And how we tend to forget
 that a pilgrimage
 is not simply a matter of getting into a car or onto a plane.

In its traditional form
 it means walking.

Walking, that, as Robert McFarlane write in his book, "The Old Ways"
 becomes a process of making sense of yourself and your world,
 that invites deep and sometimes difficult reflection,
 but even more importantly,
 is intensely physical.

Walking a pilgrimage
 is hard work.

It always starts well -
 a bright morning,
 the beauty of nature in front of you,
 the feeling of strength and power in your muscles.
 Five hours later
 you're beginning to question the wisdom of your decision to begin.

On day two
 your shins ache
 with every step;
 next, you get blisters,
 you sing
 to try to keep your feet moving forward
 in the rhythm
 of the song,
 and some mornings you wake up
 and wonder
 if you are crazy.

"A cold coming we had of it,"
 is the way T.S. Eliot imagines the kings telling the story,
 "Just the worst time of the year
 For a journey, and such a long journey:
 The ways deep and the weather sharp,

The very dead of winter.'
 And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
 Lying down in the melting snow.

There were times we regretted
 The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
 And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
 Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
 and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
 And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
 And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
 A hard time we had of it.
 At the end we preferred to travel all night,
 Sleeping in snatches,
 With the voices singing in our ears, saying
 That this was all folly.”

Folly
 is exactly what many people think we are doing
 here
 each Sunday.
 Wasting time
 looking for God.
 But we know different.
 We know
 what it is
 to encounter God,
 we know
 the joy of worship,
 the power of prayer,
 the sudden
 unexpected
 meeting with God.
 And once we've met with God
 we can't do anything other
 than continue
 to seek him out,
 to continue
 on that pilgrimage
 just like the kings
 searching for the baby
 born to be king.

Pretty much every year
I go on a pilgrimage
a long walk
in the footsteps
of one of our Christian forebears,
St Cuthbert,
St Oswald,
St Chad.

And that process of walking
mile after mile
has taught me some things about our journey of faith.

Much of the time
it's simply boring.
The first day or so
of Two Saints Way
runs along a canal.
It's pretty at first,
and then,
well, it's still pretty,
but it's pretty much the same.
A flat pathway
along a canal.
It's tough on your feet,
walking on pavement,
and you never seem to make much progress.

And isn't that like our faith pilgrimage?
Much of the time
it's just routine.
We pray,
we worship,
we read Scripture,
we serve,
and sometimes we wonder
if that's all there is to it,
this journey of faith.
It feels like
we're going nowhere.

And then there are the diversions.
Last year, on St Oswald's Way

I was happily walking alongside a river,
when a sign appeared - path ahead closed.
A footbridge over a stream had been washed away in recent storms.
So I walked upstream a way, pushing through the bushes and between the trees,
found a place where it was shallow enough to cross,
and spent the rest of the day
walking in wet boots.

Sometimes in our journey of faith,
we come across an obstacle.
It might be a crisis in our relationship,
the loss of a job,
the significant illness or death
of someone precious to us.
And we just can't see the way ahead.

Sometimes
we have to find another way around.
It can be hard;
the journey ahead may be painful for a time,
but eventually
we'll know once again
that we are moving forward,
eventually
we will again
encounter God.

And sometimes
when you're on a pilgrimage
you actually get lost.
You miss the path.
It's particularly easy
on moorland,
where the footpaths through the heather
are indistinguishable
from the tracks made by goats,
and all it takes
is to miss one marker
to lose your way.
And then you have to find your way back again,
heading toward a patch of trees or a fence,
anything
that might correspond

with what's on your map,
trying to avoid
the boggy patches
on the way.

It's something most of us have done at one time or another
in our journey of faith.
We just get distracted,
we drift off from attending church,
we get out of the habit
of praying,
and suddenly we realize
that we've lost our way.

And we have to stop,
and look around us,
look to see
how that corresponds with our map,
which is scripture,
and find our way back to a place
where we can continue on that pilgrimage
towards God.

And sometimes our pilgrimage of faith
is like the last part of St Cuthbert's Way
across the sands that at low tide
link Holy Island
with the mainland.
There are quicksands there;
the only way to cross safely
is to follow the path
marked simply by tall poles,
and trust
that those who went before us
knew what they were doing
when they put those markers there.

Sometimes we
have to simply
follow the markers that people before us have left,
the liturgy
that guides our worship,
the traditions of prayer,

the wisdom
of our elders in faith,
trusting
that they will guide us
toward God.

We are like the kings
on a pilgrimage
towards God.
And at the end, yes, at the end,
we will see him
face to face,
but unlike the kings
who had to wait until the end of their journey,
on the way, yes, on the way
we will
experience the Spirit,
encounter the holy,
catch glimpses
of God.
And kneel,
and worship.