

A Prophet's Invitation: "Take a hike!"

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
on November 27, 2016, Advent 1

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122
(by Catherine Somerville)

Santa Claus came to town last Saturday night, and now the malls are decorated, and lights are being set in our windows. Seasonal music can be heard at every turn. The world is already telling us that we need to catch up in order to meet the deadline.

This morning, the first lesson we heard echoes that notion of movement, but with a distinct slant. An ancient prophet beckons us towards a mountain and shows us what our hearts yearn for. He offers a vision of home and community, where people will be drawn to God, for there we are assured that we will see God together. Our lives will be changed, the prophet announces, and there will be an actual difference in the way the world works. Inequities will be balanced, shackles will be loosed, and wrongs will be set right. The energy and resources used to make weapons that keep is feeling scared and fearful of our neighbours will be redirected. Hungry people will be fed, and young men and women will not be sent off to die in senseless wars anymore. Then, the prophet invites us to go for a walk.

It's as simple as that. Take a walk in the light of the Lord.

I live in Val Caron now, and I have been reminded of how lovely nights are in the country when you can go for a walk and actually see the stars. A few years ago, I followed the path of the Milky Way, and walked to church. It took me a couple of weeks to get there.

I started at the Portuguese border and walked over countryside and down lazy streets, through the most beautiful vineyards you have ever seen, and followed paths through majestic forests. I walked over cobbled streets and beside crazy-busy highways as I traveled up the west coast of Spain, to reach Santiago, the Church dedicated to St. James.

I did the pilgrimage because I wanted to try and be braver than I thought I could be. I wanted to experience the life of a traveler and learn some lessons that would carry me for the second half of my life. I wanted to reconnect with God in a whole new way.

It is said that a pilgrimage is about opening oneself to the possibility of being changed. You learn what it means to be a guest in the world. You learn the lessons of trust, both in your fellow travelers and from the marker signs that help to guide you along the way. You discover that there is enough, there is always enough for the day. You learn that there is plenty of time enough to make it to the destination.

I have continued to follow a couple of the practices I learned from that trip. One is about looking up at the stars, and allowing wonder, awe and glory to have a central place in my being. The Camino route actually follows the path of the Milky Way, and the stars guided pilgrims long before there were roadside markers. At night, when I go for my walk, even if it's just a quick trek around the block, I marvel at the stars and I think about the light that God gives me for traveling through the world. When I look at the stars, mine is prayer of boundless gratitude.

Another practice is about holding others in your heart and leaving reminders. As you walk along the road to Santiago, you can pick up a stone, and carry it for a while. One of the invitations offered by the Camino is to hold someone in prayer as you carry a stone and pray for that person. When you come to a marker on the path, be it a road side sign, or a cross in the middle of a town square, you leave your stone behind. Then other pilgrims, following after, will see those stones, and they will be reminded. When a pilgrim sees a pile of stones on the road, they know that they are not alone. Someone has been there ahead of them, and marked the way.

Most nights now, I pick up a stone when I leave my driveway, and I carry it in my hand while I walk. Then I leave it with the others in a little pile that seems to be growing back by the garage.

I have learned that so many issues in my life are solved by walking. I know that I cannot keep pace with a culture that seems to thrive without speed limits, and I believe that God yearns for me to find ways to step off the path set by our culture, even in small ways, like choosing to walk as I do my errands rather than jumping in the car. I believe that God has invited me to walk.

Walk and pray. Walk and think. Walk and sing. Walk and dream. I discover that when I walk, all manner of things shall be made well with my soul.

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord. This Advent, those prophetic words will be our guide.

There are things that God can teach us only when we slow down, at the pace of walking, the speed of life. There are things we can tell each other, places of interest we can point out along the way.

As you make your way into this sanctuary in the weeks ahead, think how God is inviting you to live. Think about your walk with God, and ask yourself how it is going in your journey. Think about your heart and what God may be nudging you to shed or accept. Think about all the people you see along the way, all those beautiful faces, who offer their encouragement and care, their challenge to take a different path. Think about practices you might try out, like imagining Jesus walking beside you, or looking at the stars and seeing up there a million reasons to say a prayer of thanks.

And if you find yourself saying things like, "Oh, I can't walk very far anymore. My feet are tired, and my legs just can't carry me," I say to you that we always can remember and you can remember the favourite places you loved to walk once upon a time. And with that gift of memory, you can remember and pray, and remember and sing, remember and dream. That is how I would like to invite you to travel through these next four weeks. Travel in such a way that you can see the ordinary pieces of your lives with the eyes of faith, and together, we just may discover that we are walking on holy ground. Isaiah has it right: when we walk with God, we will make our way home, and we will not be afraid.

Sources used:

Feasting on the Word, Year A, volume 1, Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett, 2010, Westminster Press, pages 2-6

The Way is Made by Walking, Anthony Paul Beers

(Colleen Burns shares her part of the sermon.)

Thank you Catherine for inviting me to share my story of my personal spiritual practice with the congregation.

Isaiah proclaims that the people will say, “He will teach us His ways, And we shall walk in His paths.” I am going to tell you how I know this verse to be true.

For the last 3 years, I have been walking. Walking for health, yes; walking for companionship, sometimes; walking to get some nature medicine, yes, that too. But most importantly, I have been walking the Lord’s Prayer. My practice is: Pray Out, Listen In, and I have received such wisdom, this practice has changed me in incredible ways.

I was introduced to the practice of prayer walking during the prayer study circle that Rev. Judith Visser led in Fall 2013. I can’t remember the specific recommendation, but it basically suggested praying while walking. I had started taking an evening walk a few months before, so the first time I tried praying while walking it was a prayer of gratitude that came with me. I remember as I was walking and praying, looking around and seeing everything—EVERYTHING—as a blessing. Dogs and trees and businesses and central heating and cheesy yard decorations and friends and churches and everything. During that walk, I felt like my heart was connected with everything. And so I started Gratitude Walks, and that was how I walked for the next short while.

It wasn’t long after that, at another Prayer Circle meeting, that we looked at The Lord’s Prayer, or rather, we looked at different re-writings of The Lord’s Prayer from different cultural traditions. The alternative prayers were fascinating, but what they really opened me up to were the **IDEAS** behind each line of the Lord’s Prayer. It was this fascination that led me to my current Prayer Walking practice. I started beginning each walk by praying the Lord’s Prayer that we all know by heart. But then came the juicy bit, where I would walk on, going through the prayer verse by verse, but speaking my own words, the words of my own heart.

So now, will you join me on a little prayer walk? I invite you to close your eyes, or look out at those beautiful snow-covered trees, and take a walk with me . . . Here we go!

It’s a beautiful morning out here! Oh look, there’s your neighbour with her dog! We head up the road, and we start to pray:

Our Father . . . What image of God calls to you, filling you with love, calling and guiding you?

Who art in Heaven . . . Where is God for you? What are the wounded places you need God to touch and care for?

Hallowed by thy name . . . How will I keep God’s name Holy today?

Thy Kindom come . . . What would that look like? That perfect union of all people? What trust, love, and abundance would flow through all the hard corners of our city if the Kindom came today?

Thy will be done on earth . . . What can I, empowered by You, do today to make your Kindom a reality?

As it is in Heaven . . . How do you imagine Heaven?

Give us this day our Daily Bread . . . All we need is enough for today; what gifts have we already received this morning that pour out God's abundance? Enough good food, enough love, enough safety, enough health . . . We can thank God for all these gifts.

And forgive us our trespasses . . . What do you seek forgiveness for? Soak in God's grace, and receive the courage to begin again.

As we forgive those who trespass against us . . . Has someone hurt you? Has someone disappointed you? Let's take a moment and hold them in the light . . .

And lead us not into temptation . . . God, help me to discern what is a temptation; help me to discern Your will for me.

But deliver us from evil . . . Help me God to break my bad habits and disrupt my automatic responses that keep me separated from others . . .

For Thine is the Kindom . . . God, YOU are the Kindom.

The Power . . . YOU are the power, acting in us, to bring the Kindom.

And the Glory . . . YOU are the Glory: it is all for You God.

Forever and ever . . . And here we take God's long view. God has been around for a long, long time . . . some problems here are fleeting . . . some will pass with time . . . what mark can we make on eternity . . .

Amen Let it be

And as we return, we can listen for God to teach us His ways, as Isaiah promised.

Thank you so much for walking with me! Whew--What a good workout!

So, this is how I walk, to work and back home, every day. Every day going deeper into the meaning of the prayer, and deeper into relationship with God and with everyone I am blessed to meet.

I hope you will consider how this practice might speak to you, and I also pray that the next time you take a walk, you too will realize that Jesus is walking along right beside you.

Thank you.