

Reflection #2

Once you begin the path to Jerusalem, each day is part of the journey.

To find the path of the pilgrim is to walk as one looking for blessing.

May today be a day of pilgrimage for you.

Most pilgrim journeys are quite brief. For many the pilgrim path appears as the parade route. There is a beginning and an end, a set course. Six months from now you will have a “departure” date on the calendar. It may be circled or highlighted or written in bold letter **JERUSALEM**. Yet, what if your journey is much greater? What if the walk is already happening?

Today you may walk to work, walk to the car, walk to get the mail. The space between you and your destination is most likely invisible. The markers are so familiar, they are unnoticeable. Time is moving very quickly. You have not written on your calendar, **WORK**, or **POST OFFICE**. How can this then be part of the pilgrimage?



To be a pilgrim is to find the sacred space where you are. The morning walk, the daily prayer, the long conversation: each of these has the presence and possibility of the sacred. We simply do not attend to them as sacred.

Simone Weil said, “prayer is the power of attention.” In the coming months I am going to encourage you to pay attention. Read about Israel; watch films and documentaries; talk to people who have made the journey. Your attention, your prayer, will gain in power and strength.

We move from place to place in a hurry because we are convinced that the attention we have needs to be stored or saved for when we reach what is important. This is why these months are so important. You need to learn to walk as a pilgrim now. There will be so much to see and take in as you walk where Jesus walked, you will have no time in that moment to learn the art of pilgrimage.

The art of pilgrimage is gained by walking in your everyday. If you were going to run a marathon, you wouldn't wait until the day of the race to train and prepare. You would start jogging years in advance. You would jog a mile and then two. You would get into the habit each day and grow in endurance. So it is with prayer, purposeful attentive living.



It need not be discovered just in walking. The ability to sit is just as important. Consider this: can you sit quietly without worry or racing thoughts? Can you empty your mind and be present or must you always be working? The chances are very good that if I asked you to sit still and listen to your breath for 10 minutes you would begin to be restless after three, maybe four, minutes. 10 minutes would feel like an eternity.

You need to be able to walk and breathe and sit and pay attention if you want to receive the great blessing of the pilgrim path.

The pilgrim path that you will find in Israel was crafted by the mother of Constantine, Helena. After Constantine converted to Christianity (312 AD), Christians were free to build churches and the greatest builder of churches was Helena. She built the Anastasia church on the site of the crucifixion and resurrection. Today we call this church "The Holy Sepulchre." She also built the Pater Noster church in Bethany. In Bethlehem, Helena built the Church of the Nativity over the sight of Jesus birth; in Nazareth, she built the Church of the Annunciation.



Some of what Helena built remains, but most of what you see came centuries later. Much of her work of the Anastasia Church was torn down by a Fatimid prince in the eleventh century. It was this act of destruction that led to three centuries of war known as the “crusades.” Despite the destruction and war, her buildings remain profound acts of piety and devotion.

Helena provides two things that are very important for the pilgrims as they prepare for the trip to Israel. The first gift of Helena is a destination. Her churches are the places where you will join the path of 1600 years of prayer and hope, penance and devotion. When you stand in her churches you enter holy space. If you are attentive, you will feel the presence of prayer echoing through the centuries. In these places you will feel woven into the fabric of faith.

The other gift she gave was a beginning. Before this time, there were no Christian buildings. The Christian faith was considered illegal and there were no church buildings before the middle of the fourth century. For three hundred years the church existed without a building. This is important. Part of the pilgrim experience is to understand “the kingdom of God is within you.”



As you walk through Jerusalem, if you are prepared and attentive, the walk should lead you within your own heart. Standing on the temple mount, where Jesus spoke, where Solomon built his temple, you will be in the midst of ancient, holy ground. As you walk through Jerusalem, if you are prepared and attentive, you will find the path within you. Within each of us is a path leading to the presence of God. This is what Paul meant when he said, “if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have house not made of hands, eternal in the heavens.” This house is within each of us.

Walking as a pilgrim in Jerusalem is a powerful experience that changes lives. Yet, so is walking mindfully to visit a neighbor. Standing before the Holy Sepulchre is a tremendous moment. Sitting in the morning and being mindful about the rising sun can be just as tremendous. They can as they both invite the journey within.

Some might suggest you don't need to go to Israel to understand your faith or to grow in devotion. True. Yet, just as true is this: it is the choice and decision to make a journey that propels us forward into a time of great discovery.

Walk mindfully today and be blessed. Sit attentively today and be blessed. Listen for the birds in the morning and be blessed. Begin the path of the pilgrim today and be blessed.

