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Tourists and Pilgrims

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Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian
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Genesis 12:1-5; Hebrews 11:8–16; Luke 24:13–35

First in this sermon comes a big shout-out to Liz Nau for giving me a huge takeaway from our Celtic Spirituality Pilgrimage by reminding us that there are two kinds of travelers in the world: tourists and pilgrims. And not only do many people travel as tourists, they spend their entire lives as tourists, with their heads swiveling first this way and then that, plagued by FOMO, succumbing to the relentless pressure from our society, government, and economic system to be vigilant for the next best thing: the

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latest fashion, the trendiest hairstyle, the coolest app. We are conditioned from childhood to be dissatisfied, and we are bombarded with an avalanche of messaging that says we can buy our way into happiness. That's the tourist's approach to living: lots of breadth, very little depth. The theologian Paul Tillich identified this spiritual malady in the American character in 1958, when he wrote an essay about spiritual depth by calling it "the lost dimension in religion."

Tourists travel for comfort, for entertainment, for control. They go to see things—to take in the sights, check the boxes, and get back home with stories to tell, pictures to share, and tchotchkes to distribute. Tourism often comes down to a kind of consumerism – let me get to this

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destination or do this thing because that's what everyone with the wherewithal visits or does.

Pilgrims, on the other hand, travel for transformation. They go because something within them is restless, longing, searching. They don't just want to see new places; they want to be made new along the way, either by what they find or how they journey. The difference is not just in where you go—it's in what you're looking for.

A tourist asks, *"What will I get out of this trip?"* A pilgrim asks, *"Who will I become by walking this road?"*

The difference is between having and being, and with our consumerist mentality so deeply embedded in our psyches, it's difficult for many of us to stop and smell the roses without picking at least a few to take home. We live in a "more is better" culture – more money, more stuff,

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more friends, more followers, more Likes, more experiences – more, bigger, faster, better, longer. The pressure is relentless to resist saying, “I have enough. I am content. I can do without. I am looking for something else.”

I was listening to a podcast recently with the surgeon and writer Atul Gawande, known especially for his book *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. The important point Dr. Gawande makes in that book and about which he has become something of an evangelist is that more isn't always better, especially as we near the end of our lives. More treatment that simply extends a person's suffering is not, in his view – or in the view of increasing numbers of us – the best, kindest, or most humane way to care. Dr. Gawande says that the crucial

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question to ask a person nearing the end of their life is not, “How much longer would you like to live?” but rather, “What, for you, constitutes a good day?” Quality, in other words, matters more for discerning people than quantity.

But here’s a surprising thing. In the podcast I was listening to, Dr. Gawande cited a study led by Dr. Jennifer Temel at Massachusetts General Hospital, which showed that when patients refused standard aggressive treatment for stage-four lung cancer, opting instead for palliative care that was less aggressive, less invasive, and less expensive, not only did they feel better while they lived, but they lived, on average, twenty-five percent longer than patients who were treated more aggressively. And what constituted palliative care began with that simple question

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put by a doctor to the person they were caring for, “What, for you, constitutes a good day?”

Most of us don’t become very conscious of time until we realize that ours is running out. Most of us interact with time as a timepiece does, counting seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years. That’s *chronos* time, and most of us don’t do anything with it except measure it. And if we’re going through life with a tourist mindset, we’ll keep checking off as many boxes – units of time – for as long as we can.

But if, on the other hand, we go through life as pilgrims, we will distinguish *chronos* time from the other type of time mentioned in the New Testament, which is *kairos* time. Kairos time isn’t measured as much as it is evaluated. Kairos time is measured not by the days of our

lives but rather by the life in our days. And how we spend our days, as Annie Dillard says, is how we spend our lives. Pilgrims know this and they don't sleepwalk through history. They pay attention to what they're doing – they pay attention to the kind of life that they invite into their lives, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute. It is that attentiveness and that intentionality, with an awareness of the divinely-given purpose to our lives, that distinguishes the pilgrim from the tourist, and I have brought back from my Celtic pilgrimage a greater determination to live more in *kairos* time and less in *chronos* time.

Abraham and Sarah were not on a sightseeing tour; they were not tourists. They were pilgrims, journeying to unknown places in response to a divine call, just as many of us who made the pilgrimage to sacred places in Ireland

and Scotland did so in response to a divine call: a call to enlarge our understanding of how other Christians have loved God in their time and in their way; a call to be prepared to be changed; a call to risk the familiar for the unknown and untried; a call to discern how our takeaways can become part of a new normal in our spiritual lives and practices.

And above all else, those of us who made an outward pilgrimage were committed to making an inner pilgrimage as well, which is the whole point of a pilgrimage. Over the millennia, people have made pilgrimages for all sorts of reasons – some to learn, some to find health and healing, some to do penance, some to make amends – but the underlying reason everyone makes such a spirit-filled journey is to be transformed inwardly. The outward journey

is always in service to the inward journey, and both journeys, for the pilgrim – as distinct from the tourist – are to bring us closer to God.

And we don't always know how we'll make that discovery. As Hebrews says of Abraham, he was called by God to leave what he knew and loved and set out "not knowing where he was going." There was no itinerary, just a call, and Abraham's response, as one author puts it, is faith in motion. We don't always know where God's call will lead us or what we'll discover along the path or at our journey's end, but when we respond anyway, that not-knowing response is called faith.

Forest Hill Church is on such a pilgrimage right now. You all are journeying toward working and living with new pastoral leadership, a pastor or pastors who will help you

respond to God's call to shape your future identity. None of us knows the outcome of the search process, and none of us even knows what we will learn by the process itself. But we feel called by God to be intentional and attentive to that process and thereby discover more about how we can become a better instrument of God's peace.

There is a beautiful prayer attributed to various people, that speaks to the condition of the pilgrim: "Fix thou our steps, O Lord, that we stagger not at the uneven motions of the world, but steadily go on our way to our glorious home; neither censuring our journey by the weather we meet, nor turning aside for anything that befalls us. The winds are often rough, and our own weight presses us downwards. Reach forth, O Lord, thy saving hand, and speedily deliver us. Teach us, O Lord, to use

this transitory life as pilgrims returning to their beloved home, that we may take what our journey requires, and not think of settling in a foreign land.”

How many of us are settling, friends, in a foreign land today – a land that many of us once recognized but no longer comprehend? How many of us in this church are mystified and grieved by what our country has become? How many of us are confounded and dismayed by the decisions and actions of our leaders, our government, our neighbors, our relatives, and our co-religionists?

Or how many of us have reached a stage in our lives when our very own selves feel like a foreign place, a confusing place, or even a hostile place? We take it for granted that we know ourselves, but even the ancient Greek pagans knew better than that, inscribing the words

“Know thyself” above the temple of Apollo at Delphi, a place of pilgrimage for untold numbers seeking wisdom, virtue, and the right path of life.

“I do not understand my own behavior,” Paul wrote to the believers in Rome in the last of his letters, at the height of his powers, near the end of his career. For all of his accomplishments – chief among them laying the foundation of the religion known as Christianity – for all of his gifts and abilities, in important ways, Paul remained, to the end of his life, a mystery to himself. For all of his travels, the journey whose end Paul never reached was the inward journey, the pilgrimage to know himself as God knew him, loved him, and created him to be. At the end of his life, Paul was just at the start, which is why, perhaps, T.

S. Eliot could write, so many centuries later, “In my end is my beginning.”

And for those who think that we will always sense God’s presence with us merely if we ask, I would urge you to take our reading from Luke very seriously. The risen Jesus Christ accompanied two of his own followers for hours before, as the text says, “their eyes were opened” and they recognized the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread.

The divine presence is often elusive, mysterious, and baffling – “Canst thou by seeking find out God?” the book of Job asks – and the answer is no, not fully, not finally, and not even to the degree that all of our questions will be answered, our problems will be solved, and the painful knots of our lives will be untangled. For serious believers –

indeed, for serious people in general – the dark night of the soul is a thing, a real thing, and it's no joke. If you have never reached that point where you have actually wept over your own sins, weaknesses, shortcomings, and frailties, then perhaps you need to set for yourself a pilgrimage to those places in your life where your own better angels have feared to tread.

In the front matter to his latest book, John Lentz quotes the famous words of Rainer Maria Rilke to the young poet, Franz Kappus, about what to do with some of life's bewilderments:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart, and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be

given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

I want to close by thanking, again, the Rev. Liz Nau, who cannot be with us this morning, as she typically is, because of a commitment at another church. I want to thank her and Dan Bizga, our tour manager, and all of my fellow pilgrims who made our two weeks in Ireland and Scotland such a transformative experience. We have all come back from our pilgrimage changed in ways that we don't yet fully realize; it will take time to continue the inner journey to process the outer experiences. We hope that many of you will join us for dessert and conversation this coming Friday in Fellowship Hall at 6:30, when we'll try to

share with you not only what we experienced but also what, we think, those experiences might mean for our lives going forward. We covet your conversation and questions to help us dig deeper into life and thereby enrich this community of faith and God's world we are called, individually and together, to serve. Tourists visit; pilgrims serve.

Benediction – “For the Pilgrims of God”

Go now as pilgrims on the way of Christ—
not as tourists in search of comfort,
but as travelers open to grace.

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May the road rise to meet you with mercy,
may companions strengthen you in faith,
and may the Spirit guide your steps toward love.

Wherever the path is rough, may Christ walk beside you;
wherever the journey is joyful, may the Spirit give you the
voice of thanks;

and when the way leads home, wherever that may be,
may you find the welcome of God's eternal peace.

Go in peace to love and to serve—

**in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the
Holy Spirit. Amen.**