

# The Journey's End is a New Beginning

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St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA  
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Third Sunday after the Epiphany  
Mark 1:14-20

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Thank you for calling me to walk alongside you as your Interim Rector for the next few months, as your search committee works to discern St. David's next great spiritual leader. What I see with my fresh eyes is that you have excellent leadership – both on your Vestry, in your staff, among your clergy team, and on the search committee. Much of my ministry here will be to support and encourage your leadership during this time of transition and change. I couldn't be happier or feel more honored to be with you in this phase of your life – and like I said last Sunday, I will give you everything I have and am while I'm here. My most important job will be to love you through this time – and I know that this most important job will be the easiest part.

I want to begin this first time in your pulpit with a story about the Camino de Santiago.

The Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St. James, is a collection of holy pilgrimage routes across Europe that lead to the shrine of St. James in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. Christians have been making pilgrimage here since the 900s, and even today people from all over the world walk these pilgrim paths. Some walk for spiritual renewal, others walk for healing or devotion. Others come to sightsee or for the physical challenge of walking, running, cycling, or riding horseback.

Fifteen years ago my husband Michael and I felt called to walk the Camino. Our kids were young and a bit of a handful at the time. My parents could tolerate about 2 weeks of fulltime childcare. So we planned for that timeframe in which we could walk the last 150 km of the Camino ending in Santiago. We prepared for months: bought the right equipment, trained for endurance walking, broke in our hiking boots, studied the route's history, and we spoke with former pilgrims. The wisdom we consistently heard was this: *everyone walks their own Camino*, meaning, a pilgrim's experience cannot be replicated. Everyone who walks it has their own experience, draws their own meaning, navigates their own struggles. And secondly, *the Camino takes care of you*. The Way of St. James is marked for hundreds and hundreds of kilometers with bright yellow arrows that keep pilgrims on the path and point the way to Santiago. There are yellow arrows on homes, on the road, on trees and fenceposts, and street signs. We even saw one painted on a cow – funny, but ineffective. And there's always a place to stay, a warm bed and a bowl of soup waiting in whichever town a pilgrim stops for the night. *The Camino takes care of you*. All a pilgrim needs, really, is lots of moleskin for blisters, and a deep and abiding trust.

So off we went – first flying to Madrid, and then catching a train to the Galacian Alps to a small outpost called O Cebreiro where we'd join the Camino and begin our pilgrimage. Now, the thing to know is that my husband Michael is an academic. He is a book guy, a research guy, a history guy. While *I* was cutting toothbrushes in half to lessen the weight in my backpack, Michael was stuffing *his* backpack with books and maps – all the information and knowledge we'd need for a successful

hike along the Camino. Together we had parsed out how many miles we'd walk each day, what towns we'd stop in, what hostels looked best for overnights. We'd packed for every possible contingency – rain, heat, injury, stolen wallets, lost phones. We were ready to go – and after checking in at O Cebriero, off we went. Michael immediately pulled out one of the maps and we began walking due West, noses down, making sure we were doing it right, that we were in the right place heading in the right direction. Maybe you can see where this is going...it took us exactly 16 minutes to get completely lost. When we finally looked up, we found ourselves in some kind of national park along a stand of enormous pines, and not a single yellow arrow in sight. After we concluded our relational meltdown, we headed back the way we came to start over. It was during that embarrassing backtrack that we decided to put the books and maps away and henceforth look up – to maybe try trusting the Camino to take care of us, maybe easing our death grip on our need for control. If we were going to successfully walk the Camino, if we were going to be able to see and experience the life and meaning and transformation it had to offer us as pilgrims, we were going to have to let go. We were going to have to follow it and trust it, come what may.

This morning's Gospel reading from Mark takes us to Galilee and the calling of the first disciples. It is a story about unknown and uneasy territory, about letting go, trusting, and following.

The only thing we need to set the stage for the story is the first phrase: "Now after John was arrested..." Remember that just a blink before, John the Baptist had stationed himself deep in the Judean desert, shouting and proclaiming the coming of the Messiah – a vision full of hope and possibility, a wild and provocative imagery free from earthly constraints and oppressions. John had called the Galileans out from their lives, out into the dark crisp night under the stars so that they could change directions, claim a new life, heal their brokenness, start anew. And then Jesus was there, neck deep in the Jordan River, just as John had predicted, holding his breath as John baptized him, pushing his head under the water and back up again. John the Baptist himself was a symbol for the people, a prophet who pointed the way to the coming of salvation, redemption, life. And that prophetic ministry, that vision, that proclamation proved way too threatening for the powers that were. In a flash the one who had led the Galileans to the Messiah was gone, arrested, imprisoned, tortured, no longer available, turning over the proverbial apple cart for all of Galilee. The people were no doubt frightened, lost, out of control of the evolving events, entering, certainly unwillingly, into new and uncharted territory. "What do we do now?" they must have wondered. And into that tentative, shaky, frightening space came Jesus. "Follow me."

Have you ever wondered why those early disciples followed? Why they left their families, their jobs, their homes, all they'd ever known to go with him? Jesus called and they followed. Period. Mark, ever austere in his storytelling, describes no angst, no torn hearts, no backward glances. They just dropped what was in their hands and followed him, without saying a single word.

I wonder if some of it had to do with the circumstances in which the Galileans found themselves – in an uncertain and frightening moment, in a circumstance where the one who had foretold such a hopeful and life-giving future had been snatched away and silenced. Grief, fear, and anxiety certainly followed in its wake. I know in my own life, though, that when I find myself gripped or even controlled by those feelings, I also, strangely, become more open to God, in a sharper more alert way. "Heal me," I pray. "Fix me. Comfort me. Show me." Even, "change me." Maybe times of distress bring with them a more acute clarity, a sensitivity to hearing or seeing God, because we want so badly in those moments to hear and see God. I wonder if the disciples weren't somehow ready

down deep for Jesus, bereft and bewildered as they were, looking for, and hoping to see and hear, the One John had predicted would come to save them all.

I wonder, too, if the disciples didn't so much make a decision to drop everything and follow as much as something happened to them, something almost supernaturally beyond their control. A theologian I very much admire has written that "the calling of the disciples is not so much a hero story as a miracle story, as full of God's power as the feeding the five thousand or the raising of the dead. In Mark's miracle stories, Jesus says things like: 'Be made clean,' to the leper and immediately he's made clean. 'Stand up, take your mat, and go to your home' after he heals the paralytic. 'Go, your faith has made you well,' to the blind man who has regained his sight. 'Follow me,' Jesus says, and immediately they left their nets and followed him... This story, like all miracle stories, is no story about the power of human beings to change their lives... This is a story about the power of God – to walk right up to a group of fishermen and work a miracle, creating faith and trust where there was little or no faith and trust before, to give them the ability to follow – able to follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us, because he interests us more than anything else in our lives, because he seems to know what we hunger for and because he seems to be the only food that will fill us. *God issues the call, and then gives us what we need to follow.*"

At St. David's we hear in today's Good News echoes of our own story. The congregation is in a time of transition and significant change, standing -- perhaps very unwillingly -- in that unstable place between the "now" and the "not yet." There is here an anticipation for good things to come here, and also very normal grief, disequilibrium, and anxiety. And into that place of trepidation comes Jesus. "Follow me." As with the disciples, God will give us the grace and ability to follow, if we're so inclined, if we're ready to be changed, to fall in love, to recognize our own hunger and understand that God is the only one who can fill us. Following Jesus will ask for our willingness to let go a bit, to follow the signs forward that God puts in our path, to be as open as we can be to watch and wait and listen, to hold lightly what we think we can do for ourselves and allow the living God to lead us.

To end where I began, I can tell you that Michael and I did make it to Santiago. Every day at 4:00 pm the cathedral offers a pilgrims' mass to bless all those dirty and exhausted people coming off the trail. And for those with eyes to see it, carved into the ancient arch under which pilgrims have entered the cathedral plaza for 1300 years, is the alpha and the omega, Greek symbols signifying the beginning and the end. But what's so compelling is that their order is reversed – the omega, the end, is first and then the alpha is to its right. While pilgrims who have been through that in-between, transitional experience think their journey has come to an end. But in reality reaching the end of the pilgrimage inaugurates a beginning: a renewal, a new way, learnings and experiences and revelation hard-earned that shape the pilgrims' life going forward.

The possibilities for following seem endless. Sometimes following will be big and sometimes the act will be too small to mention. Regardless, the God who called us can be counted on to lead us as people who are able to follow. Whenever and however our wills pool into the will of God, time is fulfilled, and the kingdom is at hand. AMEN.

#### Resources:

*Home by Another Way*, Barbara Brown Taylor, pp.37-41, direct quote in paragraph 11.

*Heart and Mind: The Four-Gospel Journey for Radical Transformation*, Alexander John Shaia, pp.135-146.

