

Pilgrims All

Some years ago James Pike, Episcopal Bishop of New York, parked his car at the side of the road that runs through the Judean wilderness and with his wife, stepped into the desert to explore it. He never found his way back. Bishop Pike perished in the wilderness, and his wife nearly did.

The Hebrew word for wilderness means a place one passes through. To stay in the wilderness is to die there. The Hebrew word was born of Hebrew experience. The tribes of Israel passed through the wilderness on their journey of escape from the tyranny of Egypt, across the River Jordan to the Land of Promise.

This means that the word describes not only the wilderness, but also the nature of those who journey through it. They are pilgrims. The desert is not their home; they do not dwell there. Their identity is symbolized, not by the firm foundations and solid stone of a temple, but by a tabernacle—a moving tent, which is struck every morning and every night is pitched a day's march nearer home.

This idea of life as pilgrimage has proved a pervasive and enduring one. Christians are indebted to Islam for a saying of Jesus not recorded in the Gospels, but preserved on the wall of a mosque near Delhi. It reads, "Jesus, on whom be peace, said, 'This world is a bridge; pass over it but do not build your dwelling there.'"

John Bunyan begins his *Pilgrim's Progress* with the words, "As I passed through the wilderness of this world. . . ." It was the idea of pilgrimage that informed the men and women of faith who on November 11, 1620, arrived near Cape Cod after sixty-six days at sea. They journeyed from the oppression of an established church and an old country to the liberty of a promised land and a new commonwealth. Their River Jordan was as wide as the broad Atlantic and their land of promise was the country in which you and I now dwell. William Bradford, the second governor of the Plymouth Colony, wrote of those travelers:

What could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness? Neither could they, as it were, go up to the mountain-top to view from this wilderness a more Godly country to feed their hopes. For which way soever they turned their eyes, save upward to the heavens, they could have little solace or content in respect of any outward objects.

Six months after their arrival, half the pilgrims were dead, including John Carver, the first governor of the colony. Yet when the *Mayflower* was ready to set sail for England, her captain offering free passage to any who wished to accompany him, no one turned back. As Governor Bradford said of them, "They knew they were pilgrims."

So also did the Black Americans who, like the children of Israel, journeyed through a wilderness in their flight from slavery to freedom. Their spirituals are full of this awareness:

Go down Moses, way down to Egypt's land.
Tell ole Pharaoh, "Let my people go!"

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The Lord told Moses what to do
To lead the children of Israel through.
"Let my people go!"

We are pilgrims all. But what does it mean to be a pilgrim?

I think, to begin with, that it means we travel hopefully. Sometimes the pilgrim hope was otherworldly. It had to be, for there was nothing to hope for in this world. American slaves sang their "sorrow songs," as they called them, to express their despair of this world. Freedom from slavery and freedom from life were often synonymous in their thought and in their music. The only deliverance was death. All they could do was steal away to Jesus and wait for that chariot that would come to carry them home.

It was the particular genius of Martin Luther King, Jr., to show us that hope works on two levels, and that both levels are vital. There is hope for this world: that we can make something of it, and of ourselves in it. And there is hope beyond this world. The earthly and heavenly expectations are inseparable, for they gather conviction and gain validity from each other.

Martin Luther King had a dream for time and a hope for eternity. He was, at one and the same moment, constitutional and theological, political and devotional, both heavenly minded and of great earthly use, as he called us back to the very idea of America and forward to the City of God.

He knew he was a pilgrim; and it was in the hopefulness of pilgrimage that he found his courage. He told us so himself, when, anticipating his own violent and untimely death, he said he was not afraid, for he had passed through the wilderness, had been to the mountaintop, had seen Beulah Land and caught a glimpse of the glory to which he traveled.

A second characteristic of pilgrims is that they know wilderness experiences are to be passed through. To dwell in them is to perish in them. Yet many of us choose to stay in a desert of guilt, or addiction, or inferiority, or destructive relationships, or grief, or cynicism, or grievance, when we should have passed through them long ago.

Sometimes our best hope of passing through is to seek the help of others: a wise physician, a skilled therapist, a spiritual counselor, a trusted friend, a community of fellow-travelers who share a common predicament and are banded together for mutual encouragement. Sometimes we are perfectly capable of emerging on our own, by allowing a new insight to create a new attitude. But it's not easy.

We all know people who don't merely have complaints, but have become complaints. They have so dwelt in their petulance that their petulance has taken them over. They would lose their identity if they were to surrender their sense of grievance and their right to be miserable. Others wouldn't know who they were if they didn't see themselves as victims. They find it easier to blame others for their

difficulties than to accept responsibility for their own foolish decisions and thoughtless actions.

Still others would be struck speechless if they couldn't gossip. We all find it easier to justify ourselves than to accept criticism, even when it is justified. Some of us would rather allow jealousy to consume us and see life with a jaundiced eye than discipline our imagination and learn to be trustful. We find it easier to indulge our self-pity and trade our courage for sympathy than to confront the fears that possess us. We all know men and women—we may be among them—whose grief, or anger, or inferiority, or inordinate touchiness is not their problem, but their solution. It defines them; has become the dominant characteristic of their personality, what their friends have come to expect of them. Even when they catch a glimpse of what they are really like, they find it easier to remain where they are than to move.

Auden was right: We would sooner die than change. And because we will not change, the most heroic, loving, and generous part of us withers in the wilderness we refuse to leave. Let me say to you what I have often good reason to tell myself: If you don't change anything, nothing will change.

Yet all the time God offers us the strength of His presence. His promise is not that He will save us from our wilderness experiences, but that He will bring us through them. If He denies us peace, it is to give us glory. If He stirs us up, it is to bring us home. For we are from God and journey to God. He will give us a light to bring us to everlasting life.

The third thing to notice about our awareness that we are pilgrims is that it explains our homesickness.

Like Bunyan's Pilgrim, I have always known that the wilderness of this world is a place to pass through, because I have never felt at home in it. This has been most true, not when I have been most unhappy, but when my appreciation of this world has ravished me and my joys have been so deep and tender as to fill me with an inconsolable longing.

When I was little, I didn't understand this and never told it. My most poignant perceptions of goodness and beauty were unshared secrets, divulged to neither parents nor friends, for truth to tell, they were beyond telling, even to myself.

Then one day I read Malcolm Muggeridge and learned that, both as child and man, he had a feeling of not being a native, of knowing himself a stranger in this world. He speaks of the inconceivable poignancy with which he first heard the phrase in the Bible, "a stranger in a strange land." It confirmed his deepest awareness of himself and told him who he was.

On another day I read C.S. Lewis, who writes of his lifelong nostalgia, his desire for his own far-off country, most present when he was most happy. It led him to ask a question and to frame an argument. His question, as he asked it in *Mere Christianity*, was, "If I am really a product of a materialistic universe, how is it that I do not feel at home here?" And his argument, sometimes called "The Argument from

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Desire," was, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

On other days I read Plato and Plotinus, Augustine and John Donne, Henry Vaughan and George Herbert, Thomas Traherne and William Wordsworth, G.K. Chesterton and W.B. Yeats, who ended my loneliness by telling me that they had known for centuries what I had so lately discovered: that an unattainable ecstasy waits just beyond the grasp of our consciousness: that our best havings are wantings, and that the truest clue to our nature is our longing.

Sometimes I am asked if I believe in heaven. I not only believe in it, I long for it, and I know what it will be like from all the hints, intimations, and promises that have reached me as I have passed through the wilderness of this world. All beauty here has spoken to me of "the Beauty Yonder." Here we are but strangers and pilgrims. In the Land of Promise, in the Country of the Great King, we shall be at home.