

Secret Destinations *(The Christian as Pilgrim)*

5th in the series:

Christus Paradox: Oxymorons for Christian Living

While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village . . .
(Luke 10:38a)

“All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.”
(Martin Buber, *The Legend of Baal-Shem*, 1955)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, **October 8, 2017**

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Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

Today's message brings to a close my five sermon series, *Christus Paradox*, timed so that our Chancel Choir might offer you the anthem that inspired the series, its beautiful lyrics written by Sylvia Dunstan. Beginning with “*You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd*,” the author treats us to a flood of oxymorons describing Christ – Lamb/Shepherd. Prince/Slave. Peacemaker/Sword-bringer. Earthly Jesus/Cosmic Christ. This led me to think about *Oxymorons for Christian Living*, beginning with Jesus' invitation to follow him, for his “*Yoke is Easy*” and his “*Burden is Light*,” obvious oxymorons describing the Christian's journey.

“Christus Paradox”

*You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd,
You, Lord, are both prince and slave.
You, peacemaker and swordbringer
of the way you took and gave.
You the everlasting instant;
You, whom we both scorn and crave.*

*Clothed in light upon the mountain,
stripped of might upon the cross,
shining in eternal glory,
beggar'd by a soldier's toss,
You, the everlasting instant;
You, who are both gift and cost.*

*You, who walk each day beside us,
sit in power at God's side.*

*You, who preach a way that's narrow,
have a love that reaches wide.
You, the everlasting instant:
You, who are our pilgrim guide.*

*Worthy is our earthly Jesus!
Worthy is our cosmic Christ!
Worthy your defeat and vict'ry.
Worthy still your peace and strife.
You, the everlasting instant;
You, who are our death and life.*

Alleluia, You, who are our death and our life.

The words of the anthem are powerful and I hope you'll keep them as a fitting afterglow to remind you of the places this series has taken us. And perhaps you will, as I have, find especially powerful the oxymoron repeated as a refrain, "*You the everlasting instant.*"

Yet, how can a mere instant be filled with more than that instant? Oh, I think we know the answer, it's really no great mystery. We all know what it is to have moments seared into our memories, perhaps due to heart-lifting joy, or eye-opening revelation, or simply soaking in its sheer beauty. Do we not seek such moments in our living – home or away -- moments that will be remembered, refusing to fade into the gray obscurity of time?

Each we've had a bit of fun as we began by sharing a few witty oxymoronical statements, so let me add a few more. Groucho Marx said, "*The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made.*" Paul Samuelson said, "*Wall Street indexes have predicted 9 out of the last 5 recessions.*" One of my favorites, and devastatingly revealing, is Gloria Steinem, who said, "*I hate intolerant people.*" And finally, to lead into today's theme, Sam Ewing said, "*The average tourist wants to go to places where there are no tourists.*"

I've found axiomatic that last oxymoron regarding travel. Thinking on travel I came upon our text in Luke 10. We'll lightly touch upon the familiar story of Mary and Martha, but what first brought me to the passage is Luke's using the word "traveling" in his introduction to the story. "*While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, they entered a village . . .*"

Wanting to direct your attention to that snippet alone, I've collapsed the entire story which follows into three dots, that punctuation known as the ellipsis. I love the ellipsis, three dots indicating that *Something More* is hidden. The ellipsis possesses possibility, opening us to the unexpected.

I've offered you in the bulletin a second text from which I take my title. It's a quote from Martin Buber, "*All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.*" Entering that village, the disciple's couldn't have known what was just around the corner.

It's a splendid prayer for the morning or the beginning of a journey: "*Lord, give me eyes to see*

the Secret Destinations that are unsought of which I, the traveler, am unaware.” There are *Secret Destinations* on all our journeys. I don’t speak literally here of vacations beginning with a packed bag. It could be you’re not traveling any “Where” on your journey, but yours is a journey none-the-less, perhaps an intellectual or educational journey, enrolling into a new class, or opening a new book. Look for the *Secret Destinations* . . .

One of the great joys I’ve had in ministry over the last twenty years is leading some 30 faith-based journeys with Educational Opportunities Tours, primarily (13 times) to the Holy Land (the cradle of our faith) and the Mediterranean world (Paul’s missionary journeys), Europe and England, (the epicenters of the Reformation 500 years ago and Methodist movement almost 300 years ago). To have the opportunity to travel, to teach and lecture, while all the while sharing experiences with others, has been truly an enriching experience. I feel absolutely wealthy with what I’ve gained along the way, especially by discovering *Secret Destinations*.

To be sure, we have announced destinations. A year or more in advance of a journey I develop an itinerary and publish a brochure detailing the places we will visit. All is summarized before we go, an enticing listing the possibilities of the many “villages” we will enter on our travels as we follow the footsteps of Jesus in Galilee and Judea.

Coming home, though, journey finished, it’s no longer the brochure that excites. The cherished memories of our journey now have not merely text, but texture, layered over with shared experiences. The brochure lies in the recycle bin or, at most, pasted into a scrapbook now that the journey has entered the ellipsis to discover the *Secret Destinations*.

Secret Destinations, then, is something of an oxymoron. We depart envisioning our destinations but come home having experienced far more, moments hidden from the most thorough preparation. There will have been serendipitous moments filled with wonder and pleasure, memories of people and conversations, of learning and wonder and laughter. I suppose each brochure should end with an ellipsis as a clue to heighten anticipation of *What’s Hidden*.

This image is from the last summer’s journey on the Danube River on which I lectured about the Reformation, taken as my final lecture shifted to Holy Communion. I had forgotten to carry along communion wafers, but the chef on the AmaViola said “*No problem!*” more than happy to provide a loaf. I had asked for a small loaf, but small was not in the chef’s vocabulary. I was surprised to enter the hall with a loaf large enough for Jesus to have fed the 5000 without it being called a miracle. One of our pilgrims snapped this image as I appeared to levitate the loaf in order to bless it! It was so large it completely hid not only my hand but my entire arm, appearing magical.



Secret Destinations is also true of spiritual retreats like the Emmaus Walk, a three day spiritual retreat many of you have taken and several of our women are experiencing this weekend. As the day approaches for the retreat to begin, pilgrims are usually a bit queasy about what to expect. “Give me a detailed brochure!” But the pilgrims are encouraged to relax and “Let it happen. Trust those who have prepared this journey for you and you will discover Secret Destinations you couldn’t have imagined!” Most pilgrims aren’t comfortable with that sort of openness to the moment, an ellipsis more threatening than promising. “I don’t want an ellipsis! Spell it out!” The journey requires trust, a willingness to let the moment unfold.

Whether it’s a spiritual retreat like Emmaus, or a faith-based trip, or simply a family vacation – it’s natural to want details nailed down. Like Martha in our gospel story, these things are too important to leave to chance. Mary, though, seems to have recognized an ellipsis in this moment of encounter with Jesus which became for her a *Secret Destination*, sensing that she was being invited into a harbor she had never visited.

I love Constantin Cavafy’s poem, *Ithaka*, an address to Odysseus, the hero of Homer’s epic, *The Odyssey*. But it’s really advice for you and me on our journeys through life toward our goals, our very own *Ithakas*. First published in Greek in 1911, its first English translation came out in 1924. Click on the link below to hear the poem recited by Sean Connery with the music of Vangelis (*Chariots of Fire*), in the background.

[Ithaca by C.P.Cavafy \(with Sean Connery & Vangelis\) - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1n3n2Ox4Yfk)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1n3n2Ox4Yfk>

*As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don’t be afraid of them:
you’ll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won’t encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.*

*Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you’re seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,*

*sensual perfume of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.*

*Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.*

*Ithaca gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.*

*And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.*

What is your *Ithaca*, that beckoning which called you to enter harbors for the first time? One of the joys of a new pastor is to hear the stories of the people, to come to know through your stories the journey that brought you here, to the Village, to this harbor. Perhaps this place where we live – more than any other congregation I've ever been called to serve -- is an Ithaca for you, having arrived knowing yourself wealthy from all you've gained along your journey to this place.

So, as
this
one

ITHACA

*As you set out for Ithaca
hope that your journey is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
angry Poseidon - do not be afraid of them
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare occasion
touches your spirit and your body.*


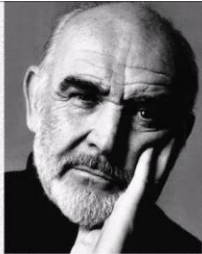
*Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
wild Poseidon - you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.*

*Hope that your journey is a long one,
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you come into harbors seen for the first time,
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind -
as many sensual perfumes as you care,
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and learn again from those who know.*

*Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so that you're old by the time you reach the island,
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Ithaca gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.*

*And if you find her poor, Ithaca never has fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you will have understood by then what these Ithacas mean.*

by C. P. CAVAFY (1863-1933)



ITHACA
C. P. Cavafy

RECITATION
by
SEAN CONNERY

MUSIC
by
VANGELIS

I end
series,
last

oxymoron I will comment upon. It's from the anthem "*Christus Paradox*," describing Jesus as our "*Pilgrim Guide*." Pilgrims need guides, but Jesus is both *pilgrim* and *guide*. This makes me think of the Emmaus disciples in Luke 24. The resurrected Jesus walked on the road with the Emmaus disciples, a fellow pilgrim. And yet, he was the unrecognized guide, which became apparent in the breaking of the bread.

May this Jesus, he who our *Pilgrim Guide*, walk beside you always. Let's now close the series where we began five weeks ago, singing the hymn, "*Guide me, O, thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land.*"

