

“Yea, Though I Walk”
(#4 in the “Only This and Nothing More?” Lenten series)

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . .
(Psalm 23:4a)

*In one sense we are always traveling.
And traveling as if we did not know where we were going.
In another sense, we have already arrived . . .
But, Oh! How far have I to go to find You in Whom I have already arrived!*
(Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, **March 11, 2018**
(Volume 1 Number 34)
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On Ash Wednesday, the threshold of Lent’s forty days, we were greeted with a message of hopelessness in the smearing of the ash on our foreheads. With a bit of imagination I make out in my forehead wrinkles a Lenten roadmap, as it were, guiding me my journey toward Good Friday and its promise of death and the tomb.

The tomb is not only what awaited Jesus in this redemptive drama we replay in our liturgy each year. It is inevitably what awaits you and me at the end of our journey. “*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.*” The psalmist is reminding us that our walk through this world is a journey from dust to dust, as our Ash Wednesday ritual reminds us: “*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*”

This fact of our mortality we grimly acknowledge. But, are we *Only This and Nothing More*? That question has been our guiding thought in this Lenten series, and I hope you’ve found my answer emphatic. No, as human persons we are NOT *Only This and Nothing More*. Something there is within us which cannot accept mortality as the sum of our Being. We know this, not only, or even primarily, through biblical revelation, but also through a virtually universal innate sense beckoning us toward transcendence. We human persons imagine ourselves More, that our human destiny transcends the irrefutable dust-to-dust journey of our bodies.

In Week One I shared with you the riddle of the Sphinx. how guarding the way to Thebes the Sphinx posed a riddle to Oedipus. “*What is the creature that in the morning goes on four legs, in the midday on two legs, and in the evening on three legs?*” Oedipus answered the riddle, that the creature is none other than humankind, crawling on four legs in the morning of life, walking on two legs in the middle of the journey, and bent and walking with the aid of a cane in the evening of life – three legs. Clearly, 4-2-3 is the mathematical algorithm of our lives, the GPS (*Gradual Progressive Schematic*) guiding us as we walk through the *Valley of the Shadow of Death*.

This much is undeniable. But, is this the sum of it? Are we *Only this and Nothing More*? Are we fated to live out only the characteristics determined by genetics? And if so, why do we feel

called, beckoned to transcend fleshly impulses? Why not just give ourselves over to the survival of the fittest? If we are only this -- 4-2-3 flesh traveling on a journey from Cradle to Grave -- Why do we hunger so for God?

Perhaps the most quoted line written by the fourth century church father Augustine of Hippo is, *"Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in thee!"* Does not the undeniable presence of this hunger in the human soul exist because there is something that can fill that hunger? Would we hunger to be satisfied with food or drink if there were no corresponding reality to satisfy that hunger? This was the thought that compelled the great 20th century Christian scholar of Oxford University, C. S. Lewis, toward the conviction that we are not *Only This and Nothing More*.

Last Sunday I used the image of scaffolding wrapped around St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan. I was focusing on the outside influences shaping us. I don't mean merely the luminaries in Christian history such as I've just mentioned (Augustine and Lewis). I mean, rather, parents, teachers, pastors, friends, mentors -- the soul-scaffolding all around you.

This morning I want to invite you inside the temple, into a less public, more private realm in which to meditate on your Lenten journey. I invite you this morning to walk into the interior of the temple of yourself, a place intensely private, often uncomfortably so. It is good to get accustomed to walking this sacred space alone, for one day you will surely walk it alone, that day when you cross the threshold into death.

Yet, in another way, not at all alone. *"I will fear no evil, for THOU art with me."*

Having led several Wesley Heritage Tour groups through England, I've been in the London room where John Wesley died and seen the famous painting of Wesley on his deathbed surrounded by his friends. These who had been his scaffolding were with him, but on Wesley's final journey the scaffolding would fall away. Alone Wesley walked into the valley of the shadow of death, yet his last words were, *"The best of all, God is with us."*



Let's think now a bit more literally about walking. Muscles tense. One leg becomes a pillar, holding the body upright between earth and sky, as the other becomes a pendulum, swinging from behind. The heel touches down and the weight of the body rolls forward onto the ball of the foot. The toe pushes off, and the weight of the body shifts again, legs reversing position. *Yea, though I walk.*

Walking establishes a rhythm beneficial to the private nurture of the soul. Most of the time our walking is merely practical, the unconsidered locomotive means between Point A and Point B. There are, though, those times when walking is more, and I don't mean merely exercise. I speak of the moments when walking becomes an investigation. A ritual. A meditation. An intentional

wandering experienced as contemplation (do you see the “temple” in the middle of the word *contemplation*?). Walking alone can be a journey inside the temple of yourself.

This is a subset of walking, physiologically like but philosophically and spiritually unlike the way you might walk to your car to take you shopping. Different is this sort of walking. And worth pondering.

So I sat down this week to think about walking. Then I stood up again. And walked. A desk, after all, is no place to think large thoughts. So, I took longer walks in the changing weather of late winter, hoping that what would emerge would be a budding, not of a tree, but of a new thought, such alignment of soul which comes only after a time, often miles of arms swinging in synchronization. It worked! I knew, returning home, how to address my subject in a way I had not when I walked out the door to begin. The plan appeared not as sudden epiphany, but with gradual sureness. Rebecca Solnit was spot on when she wrote of walking, “*When you give yourself to places, they give you yourself back.*” Exploring the landscape is a great way to explore the mind. Walking travels both terrains.

The rhythm of silent walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking. No matter the landscape, it is endlessly fertile. Perhaps this is what the Welsh poet William Henry Davies meant when he wrote (and it wasn't about golf, though you golfers may hear it that way): “*Now, shall I walk, or shall I ride? 'Ride,' pleasure said. 'Walk,' Joy replied.*” Yes, walk! Walking is a way to nurture that part of us that imagines, dreams, and explores.

One of the most famous pilgrim walks in the Christian world is *El Camino de Santiago*, the *Way of St. James*. This 500 mile journey, mostly through Spain, is very high on my bucket list. Several years ago a good friend, one of my church members in Little Rock, unexpectedly lost his job. He had heard me in a Tuesday class talk about the Camino de Santiago, a pilgrim walk engaged not to see something new on the outside so much as to discover something on the inside. I had seen the 2010 film, *The Way*, directed by Emilio Estevez and starring his father, Martin Sheen as Dr. Tom Avery, a dentist grieving the loss of his son who had wanted to make that journey. Tom decides (despite that he thought it a total waste) to walk the Camino his son had so wanted to walk, carrying his own sons cremains. It was a journey from dust to dust, and yet so much more. Tom experiences a unique transformation of his soul.

The story of the Santiago de Compostella begins in Acts 12 (about 42 A. D.). Shortly before Passover, James the brother of John, one of the first four disciples, was beheaded by order of King Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great. James was the first of the twelve to suffer martyrdom, and the only one of the twelve whose death is recorded in the New Testament.

Tradition suggests that he had made a missionary journey to Spain, and that after his death his body was taken to Spain and buried there. Compostella, his traditional burial place, became a



major site of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages, and for over 1,000 years pilgrims have traveled the Way of St James to the church in Compostella.

One begins the pilgrimage from anywhere, wherever they live, but the final path is some 500 miles through France and Spain, a Way requiring many weeks to follow. The pilgrim has a “passport” stamped at various places along the Way, which has a system of dormitory style hostels, called albergues, as little as five kilometers apart, and as many as fifteen kilometers. Such pilgrimage fosters an attitude of holy homelessness, a road map to new possibility expressed in two words: “*Not yet.*”

In the film, Tom’s three companions have each come for different, and very mundane, reasons. One to quit smoking, another to lose weight, and a third to find inspiration for his writing of a book. These quests are hardly spiritual in nature, and yet what they discover along the Way is the transforming of even the shape of their quests. They discover, as pilgrims are wont to do, that their quest is not so much a venturing out as it is a coming home, a journey to the heart. *Click on the link below to see the trailer for The Way:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5VZKWcgw6c>

Many of you will have invited small changes in your lives during Lent. While such changes are slight, do they not hold within them the realization of a much larger reality, that we human persons can experience transformation. Lent reminds us that we are *Not Yet* what we are becoming, that ours is a journey, that we are NOT “*Only This and Nothing More.*” That’s the pilgrim life, a *Not Yet* expectancy of becoming More tomorrow than we are today.

So let the journey continue! We may not ever walk the Camino, as those pictured below, but as we walk life’s journey, 4-2-3, let us walk knowing God is with us.

“*Yea, though I walk . . .*”

