

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
December 18, 2011 – Advent 4

Reading: Luke 1: 26-56

A Time of Holy Pilgrimage

And so it begins. Mary of Nazareth heard the angel's announcement, and the first Christian pilgrimage began. Mary set out in haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where her cousin Elizabeth lived with her husband Zechariah. Who knows why she felt the need to share her news with this particular cousin. Why she would undertake a journey when there were so many other details about the birth of her child to be sorted out. And yet "she set out in haste" with the conviction that spiritual understanding, comfort and peace were either to be found in this destination, or in the journey itself.

And that was only the first of the many journeys that punctuate the birth narratives. Mary making her way to the hill country, or a young couple following the road to Bethlehem, or colourful magi following a star or the holy family escaping to safety in Egypt. The stories surrounding Jesus' birth, from conception to childhood, unfold with various journeys, various companions, various destinations. But all represent God's people seeking to come closer to God, in hopes of finding understanding, security, joy and peace.

Today we celebrate stories of pilgrimage from our global family – as God's children from various faith traditions set out as pilgrims, and as seekers to feel closer to God.

Mount Kailash

The oldest known pilgrimage site is Mount Kailash in Tibet, which has been a holy destination for more than 15,000 years. This legendary mountain is revered by four different religions and is regarded as the most sacred pilgrimage destination in Asia. Hindus and Tibetan Buddhists regard Mt. Kailash as the earthly manifestation of Mt. Meru, their spiritual centre of the Universe. On top is the abode of the Hindu god, Shiva. For the Jains, Kailash is acclaimed as the site where their first prophet achieved enlightenment. Believers of the Bon religion affirm it is the site where their founder Shranab is believed to have descended from heaven.

Hindu legend tells us that when the soldiers of Prince Rama were injured, Hanuman, his monkey ally, was sent to Mount Kailash to fetch a medicinal herb which restores life. Unable to recognize the plant, Hanuman picked up the whole mountain and brought it to Rama. When the herbs were collected,

Hanuman is said to have tossed the mountain back in the direction of the Himalayan range, landing in Tibet.

Walking the 32 mile trail around Mount Kailash takes about three days, sometimes at altitudes as high as 18,000 feet. Sprawling below the peak is the sacred Manasarovar Lake, where a drink of its waters is said to wash the sins of a hundred lifetimes and a ritual bath delivers a pilgrim to paradise. Some say that the ritual circumambulation around the mountain trail erases the sins of one lifetime. 108 times around the mountain will enable you to reach Nirvana!

Vision Quest

A **vision quest** is a rite of passage in many Native American cultures. Unlike other holy pilgrimages, it does not require a particular destination, long distances or new geography. The vision quest is more of an inner journey.

The vision quest is taken upon reaches a turning point in life, it is a journey taken to find oneself. Traditionally, it was a time when a young person would seek direction for the future. In modern times, vision quests can be taken by anyone seeking a deeper understanding of their own life's meaning.

Vision Quests require breaking away from the daily routines of a seeker's life. The time of several days, spent away from one's usual commitments are intended to aid the exploration of a truer or more spiritual life direction. When someone chooses to make a vision quest, and an elder agrees that they are ready, the quester goes on a personal, spiritual quest alone in the wilderness, often in conjunction with a period of fasting. The choice of what represents "wilderness" for that person on the quest may vary - some spend the quest in the quiet of wooded forest, some in the hectic maze of inner city life. The intention is to break away from the usual routines and to focus on inner resources and inner wisdom.

This period of isolation usually lasts for a number of days while the mind and the heart are attuned to the spirit world. Usually, a guardian animal will come in a vision or dream, and the pilgrim's life direction will appear at some point. The quester returns to the tribe, or to normal routines of life, and they share their vision with the elder and the community, who confirm whether the vision is true. Once they are ready, the quester will then pursue that direction in life.

Camino de Santiago de Compostela

The Camino de Santiago, also known in English as The Way of St James, is a collection of old pilgrimage routes which are spread out across Europe. All routes have Santiago de Compostela in north west Spain as their final destination. Santiago de Compostela is the goal of the journey because of its cathedral, which is said to contain the bones of Jesus' disciple, James. The Way of St. James has existed for over a thousand years. It was one of the most important Christian pilgrimages during medieval times, along with Rome and Jerusalem, and it was a pilgrimage route on which a plenary indulgence could be earned, which meant a full remission of sins.

During the Middle Ages, the route was highly traveled. However, the Black Death, the Protestant Reformation and political unrest in 16th-century Europe led to its decline. By the early twentieth century, only a few pilgrims arrived in Santiago annually.

Since then, however, the route has regained its popularity. It attracts a growing number of modern-day pilgrims from around the world, and has been named one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites. Today tens of thousands of pilgrims, both Christian and non-Christian, set out each year from homes around the world to make their way to Santiago de Compostela. Most travel by foot, some by bicycle, and a few travel as some of their medieval counterparts did, on horseback or by donkey. In addition to people undertaking a religious pilgrimage, many are travellers or hikers who walk the route for the simple adventure of removing themselves from the bustle of modern life. Today, the long journey acts as a gathering place for many modern "pilgrims", with many reasons for tracing its paths.

The Hajj

The Hajj is a pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, a pilgrimage which most adult Muslims will undertake at least one time in their life, providing they are able-bodied and can afford to do so. It is the fifth pillar of Islam: one of the five religious duties that identify a faithful believer. Each year it takes place in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar, and attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims.

The Hajj is based on a pilgrimage that was ancient even in the time of Muhammad in the 7th Century, dating back to the time of Abraham. Abraham's wife, Sarah, was unable to conceive, and upon her request, Abraham had taken their female servant, Hagar, as a second wife. Hagar bore Abraham a son, Ishmael. After Sarah finally bore Abraham a son, Isaac, jealousy arose between the two women and Abraham decided to break from Hagar and Ishmael, leaving them to God's care in the desert.

Looking for shelter, food and water, Hagar ran back and forth between the hills of Safa and Marwa seven times with her son. In desperation, she laid her child on the sand and begged for God's assistance. The baby cried and hit the ground with his heel, and a spring of clean water, the Zamzam Well miraculously sprang forth in that place. The story teaches that God really does care for us, and that no one is expendable.

Muhammed himself was said to practice this pilgrimage, and after he received the revelation, he cleansed the Kaaba of many idols. Pilgrims wear simple clothing to demonstrate the equality of all pilgrims before God: there is no difference based on wealth or status or ethnicity. They re-enact a series of rituals that tell the story and mark the holy places. At the end of the pilgrimage a festival meal is held, and celebrations are held all over the world to teach the message that God cares for everyone.