

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.

You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.” When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God:

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.” You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Hebrews 11:8-16 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Sermon: Songs for Pilgrims

Leo Tolstoy once told a tale about two old men who set out on a pilgrimage to worship God at Jerusalem. One man was serious and firm, long bearded and upright. The other was a keeper of bees and fond of drink. They had made their pilgrimage vow to God

when they were young, but business had always kept the serious man from going. Finally his friend convinced him to leave his affairs in the charge of his oldest son and make the trip.

Almost as soon as they started unexpected events kept slowing their progress, and at one point the beekeeper got drawn into the life and death drama of a household that was beset by sickness and despair. His serious friend, frustrated at all the delays, went on ahead, and was alone when he reached Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem the serious man kept getting glimpses of his friend at every place that pilgrims gather, but could never quite catch up with him. After the pilgrimage he traveled home alone and stopped back in the village where the beekeeper had stayed behind. He found the people in the household were now well and hears how his friend never left them but took pity on them, served them food and drink, and got them back up on their feet. Then the beekeeper gave up going to Jerusalem and turned back to his own village.

The serious man suddenly understands that his vision of his friend in Jerusalem was God's message about both the nature of worship and of pilgrimage, and he returns home with the realization that the best way to keep one's vows to God is to do his will and show love to others.

Pilgrimage is an interesting theme in our story of faith. This morning we read a passage from Deuteronomy where the worshippers are instructed to bring the first fruits of their labor to the Lord as an offering and then make this confession: A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.

In the second lesson, the apostle Paul speaks of Abraham and his wanderings, how he lived in tents and was a pilgrim travelling towards that new homeland which God had prepared for him and his children.

The hymnal we used for forty years before the new one was called the Pilgrim Hymnal and had a special section for songs of pilgrimage with such hymns as "Fight the Good Fight," "He Leadeth Me," "Onward Christian Soldiers," and one with the first line: My faith it is an oaken staff, the traveler's well loved aid."

I don't know how the traveler would do today with an oaken staff. I had this shillelagh among my father's things, but I wasn't sure it could get through airport security, so I left it behind when we traveled to Ireland last week.

The trip to Ireland was a bit of a pilgrimage in its own right. Our first night was supposed to be spent on an island off the west coast where my father's grandmother was born and where that part of the family had lived for generations. The family name, which was Grady, is still dominant on the island, along with all the names on that branch of the family tree.

But I was worried we were never going to make it to the island. Our plane sat on the runway at Kennedy airport for almost two hours waiting to take off, and even though we rushed as fast as we could once we landed in Dublin, we missed the train to the west coast by about two minutes and another was not going that far for five hours, arriving well after the last ferry to the island.

The stationmaster was very helpful and told us that if we took a train half way there, we could get on a bus and arrive in time to catch the boat to our destination. So that's what we did. And that's when we really learned about pilgrimage.

Did you know that they drive on the wrong side of the road in Ireland? Did you know that the roads are very hilly, winding, narrow, and that people drive too fast? Whenever a truck came at us from the other direction our driver would squeeze over until we'd hear the noise of the branches from the roadside bushes hitting the side of the bus. Those bushes were growing out of stone walls, so the sound was his low tech method of knowing there was no more room to yield. Apparently it didn't occur to him to slow down.

I was sitting in the very back seat in the middle so I could stretch my legs and Eileen was one seat in front of me. We noticed that people up and down the aisle were busy saying the rosary, and assumed this was due to their experience with this mode of Irish travel.

Actually, Eileen could not sit next to me because that seat was taken by a young African man. At one point Eileen passed me back part of a scone and I was happily chewing away when this young African man addressed me. He said – you and I we are sitting next to each other, are we not. And that means that I am responsible for you and you are responsible for me. If you have something to eat you should offer to me as well.

Well, that's not exactly how we do things on the HART bus line, but this was Ireland, so I said, "Would you like some."

He didn't answer directly but simply repeated his first thought about how sitting together on the bus meant we were responsible for each other, so I asked again – "Would you like some."

This time he said, "No," smiled broadly, and settled back into his seat.

And to tell the truth at that moment I felt like this bus was absolutely the best way to start our trip, because I knew we weren't in Kansas anymore.

Then the bus driver announced that we were about to arrive in Knock, and suddenly all the rosaries were put away and most of the passengers got themselves ready to disembark. What I didn't realize is that we were on a bus full of pilgrims and we were just around the corner from a shrine that attracts travelers from every part of the world.

Two things I learned in Ireland were never admit you haven't read any of James Joyce and don't say you've never heard of Knock.

Pilgrimages to Knock began in 1879 when Mary, St. Joseph and St. John the Evangelist appeared at the south gable of Knock Parish Church. The apparition was witnessed by fifteen people, young and old. From this miraculous occurrence Knock has grown to the status of an internationally recognized Marian Shrine.

Pope John Paul II made the pilgrimage in 1979, commemorating the centenary of the apparition, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta visited the Shrine in June of 1993. One and a half million pilgrims visit the Shrine annually.

One of the traditional acts of worship for the pilgrims is this prayer:

Our Lady of Knock Queen of Ireland, you gave hope to your people in a time of distress and comforted them in sorrow. You have inspired countless pilgrims to pray with confidence to your Son, remembering His promise; "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find." Help me to remember that we are all pilgrims on the road to heaven. Fill me with love and concern for my brothers and sisters in Christ, especially those who live with me. Comfort me when I am sick or lonely or depressed. Teach me how to take part ever more reverently in the holy Mass. Pray for me now, and at the hour of my death. Amen.

As the young African man left the bus his words came back to my mind: you and I we are sitting next to each other, are we not. And that means that I am responsible for you and you are responsible for me.

Today in church we have two occasions of pilgrimage. In our sacrament of baptism we recognize the beginning of a pilgrimage of faith for another of God's precious children and this morning we say goodbye to Leslie Foley, who came here three years ago a mere candidate for ministry and leaves an ordained and esteemed pastor of the church.

Although we might have hired here just to improve our diversity – we needed a token Tennessee Vols fan on the staff – we were pleasantly surprised at all the other wonderful qualities she possesses and are very glad that her pilgrimage led her into the life of this congregation.

The enthusiasm and positive energy Leslie brought into our office will be greatly missed. She helped us on our pilgrimage as a church, and we wish her all the best on her pilgrimage as a person and a pastor. To Leslie, to our choir who is taking a summer break, to baby Daphne and to all pilgrims who have gathered here today we offer an Irish Blessing:

May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face;
the rains fall soft upon your fields and until we meet again,

may God hold you in the palm of His hand.