

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
August 6, 2017
Genesis 32:22-31 & Matthew 14:13-21

God, you bless us so abundantly. Let my reflection this morning explore and express your goodness in your presence amongst us.

Good morning! It's wonderful to be back!

For those of you who don't know, I've been away for a month, with my husband Jim, to walk the Portuguese Camino. The word "camino" simply means "the way" or "road" in Spanish. And *The Camino* refers to the pilgrimage to the resting place of St. James', the apostle's, bones in Santiago, Spain. There are several routes from all over Europe. Many date back 1100 years. And the route we chose to walk, as the name suggests, starts in Portugal, ending in the city of Santiago, in the northwest of Spain.

Jim and I walked for 13 days, covering about 240 kms. And I could relate to the reading from the Old Testament this morning where Jacob wrestles with God and limps away from the encounter. I ended many days with a limp as we entered the village or city where we would spend the night. And I wrestled with God as we walked every day. And like Jacob, I can say that I have been truly blessed.

It's difficult to express my experience. I'm still processing it. Others have told me the pilgrimage continues internally for much longer than the actual walk and I suspect they are right.

But I will endeavour to share a few thoughts and experiences with you this morning. A key insight was the grasping and losing and then grasping again the nature of pilgrimage. *Everything* that happens on the Camino is part of the pilgrimage. This sounds obvious but really, it's amazing how often I failed to grasp this truth.

For example, I developed heat rash on my legs the 3rd day of walking. My legs became red, blotchy, itchy, painful and hot. The rash kept spreading. And I couldn't bear to have the direct sun on my legs so I had to wear pants. And it was hot! I couldn't believe this was happening. I had planned to walk in shorts! I was uncomfortable! I worried that my legs would never recover and my skin would be permanently damaged. "This was not how this pilgrimage should be!!" I complained to Jim.

And then it hit me. This *was* my Camino experience. There was absolutely nothing wrong. I stopped resisting the experience; the pain lessened, and the rash and having to wear pants no longer bothered me. I felt free, light. Of course I took care of the rash but I no longer obsessed over or resisted it.

And I began to see in talking with others, that everyone had their own challenges, their own learnings, their own stumbling blocks. The challenges were physical, spiritual, mental, and relational.

It was life. And it was happening on the Camino. But in a special way, it seemed.

Well, miracle of miracles, the rash slowly disappeared and I could wear shorts and the experience faded away as other challenges and experiences arose. The Camino wasn't supernatural, it was super real. I began to see God in the little moments and let go of the expectation of something huge and profound happening. I was looking for something I imagined instead of seeing what was.

It was interesting how challenging it was for me to grasp this truth for myself yet how easy it was to see it in others. There was Cindy, who we kept bumping into on the way. We didn't see her for several days and when she came upon us having lunch in a park, complained to us that two men from Israel had latched onto her and had been walking with her. They asked her for help with everything: advice on which albergue, or hostel, to stay at; what restaurant to eat at; how far to walk in a particular day. You get the idea. She said, "You know, I'm a helpful person but these guys are sucking me dry. They're ruining my Camino." I could see it clear as day. "Maybe this *is* your Camino," I said. "To deal with this challenge in a way you've never done before." She looked at me, irritated, and then suddenly smiled. "Yes," she said, "I think you're right!" And we had a really good laugh together.

With just a back pack on your back and nothing to do each day but walk, life becomes pretty simple. Everything is part of the experience and the suffering comes from resisting what's happening;

or blaming others for your experience. It's difficult to walk 5-6 hours a day and at the same time it's easy because you just put one foot in front of the other. And suddenly you arrive at the end of your journey and can't believe you're actually there!

The first day was exciting. I had the idea that I was going to have an amazing and profound spiritual experience. I was alert, excited, energized. After 3 hours we were nowhere near our goal for the day and my feet began to hurt. The sun beat down on us and I kept thinking, "*When* are we going to get there?" My mind was racing all over the place. When we arrived at the coast, the albergue/hostel wasn't open so we sat at a café to drink a cold beer. The next thing I knew Jim was gently removing the beer from my hand. I had fallen asleep!

That night we slept in a dorm with 5 other people from all over the world. Cell phones kept beeping and blinking; people were up and down to the bathroom all night slamming the door as they came and went. I lay there tense; judging my fellow travellers and their incredible insensitivity. It was a busy night; both inside my head and outside in the room. The night ended early when the noise of a nearby market being set up woke us at 4:30. We decided to get up and go.

We began walking in the dark and it was profoundly quiet and beautiful. And then suddenly, we couldn't find one the arrows that continually point out the way. Standing there bewildered in the dawning light, a man came out of nowhere, pointed us in the right

direction and disappeared just as mysteriously. This was the Camino. People appearing out of nowhere to support and guide us.

As the day dawned, I was exhilarated. The route took us through villages, by fields, past farmhouses and vineyards. We stopped for a couple delicious café com leite. Then there were lakes and streams and forest paths. I was enjoying myself so much!

Jump forward five hours. I was running out of steam. Jim checked the guide book and felt sure we were close to Barcelos where we would be spending the night. But the miles kept opening up before us and I began to despair. Suddenly I was having stabbing pains in my left heel. We stopped to ask someone where we were. "Only 2 more miles," they said. I lost it. Jim and I snapped at each other. And suddenly, the day was not wonderful. It was awful. The Camino was a disaster!

Long story short. We cheated. We took a cab the last 2 miles, found a hotel room and collapsed. We'd been walking almost 9 hours.

All the tricky dynamics in our marriage came up. Just like that. Luckily we have 35 years of hard work to fall back on and we were able to talk it through. So we stayed in Barcelos two nights; resting and digesting what the Camino was giving us to deal with. Drinking vino verde and talking and getting back on track.

When we started walking again, it was in a totally different way. With respect for each other and acknowledging that although we were walking together, we each were having our *own* pilgrimage experience. And my respect for Jim and all the other pilgrims grew.

Each one of us had our challenges; each one of us had our unique relationship with God and with each other; each one of us had unique needs. This was a very special time for each of us. We were a loose community of people walking together; meeting up here and there in sometimes the most unexpected ways.

The pilgrimage can be a metaphor for life. Everything that happens is part of our path. We create suffering for ourselves and others when we resist what comes our way; the people and the experiences. When we say things like, “This is not how it should be,” and “I can’t wait for things to get back to normal,” or, “How come this is happening to me?” or when we compare ourselves and our experiences to others’, we miss the point. Life is not designed to go the way we plan; we don’t have that kind of control. Life happens; our power lies in how we choose to respond to what arrives each moment and each day. This is our pilgrimage. To learn to walk with open hearts and minds, caring for others along the way, as we head towards our final destination. Through death and into new life. Without knowing fully how it will be, struggling with doubts, but knowing how blessed we are indeed. Thanks be to God!

Amen.