

A Pilgrim Heart

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“Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” We pray the words of this old chestnut, this familiar lullaby, over and over on so many occasions. We pray them awaiting an operation, for comfort; we pray them in the evening, as we wonder whether our job is about to be eliminated; we pray them, collectively and tearfully, at virtually every funeral. In fact, we probably pray them so much that, a bit like the lyrics of “Amazing Grace,” I doubt whether we really think about what the words are saying to us. So today I want to suggest a new way of reading Psalm 23. I want to suggest to you that it is a psalm about pilgrimage, a spiritual itinerary through this life and leading into the next.

You see, as you walk through the words of the psalm, you also trace a physical route. God leads us through green pastures, so we walk through pastures laden with poppies and lupine, meadowlarks springing up into the air as we pass. God leads us beside still waters, so we come upon a glimmering pool, a sea of glass, and the waters are calm and our hearts are stilled. God leads us along forest paths, so we trace hiking trails through stands of proud white pine and blasted-limb sycamore. Finally, God leads us into a dark and fearful valley. Suddenly the sky is cloudy, the sun is gone and a chill wind blows right through our jacket. But He is close by us, and His presence warms us.

This is the description of a journey, a sort of believing tourist’s guide to Planet Earth and all the experiences we will traverse there. We know it is a topography, a travel narrative, too, because the

emblems of a pilgrim are also present into the text: God's rod and staff comfort us. Every pilgrim walks with a rod for measuring the depth of water in the way of his path; every pilgrim carries a stout stick for support, balance and protection.

The most famous pilgrimage in the Western world is probably the route to St. Jacques de Compostelle. Even that ditzy New Ager Shirley Maclaine, has walked it! This ages-old pilgrimage route leads through France, down into the heart of Spain, to the quintessential pilgrim's church. For centuries, people of all persuasions, all ages and for all sorts of reasons, have trod this trail. The long road takes over a week to walk, and there are no hotels or signs or rest stations. All you find along this road are rustic shelters called hospices and, indeed, this is where the Hospice movement got its name. These are places for people in extremis, at the end of their wits, at the end of their rope, having nowhere else to rest, nowhere else to put a roof over their heads. And these hospices—so much appreciated -- are few and far between. When the weary pilgrims finally drag into Compostela, and stand at the great square of the ancient cathedral to be blessed by the presence of the brother of Christ, St. James (Jacques), they are given another pilgrims' token, a conch shell. This St. Jacques shell symbolizes their identity in Christ received at baptism—and that is why, in most churches, the priest will ladle the water from the font with a silver shell before pouring it over the head of the baby he is about to baptize.

We pilgrims psalm our way along the road of life, en route for the Heavenly City. One of my favorite books when I was young was John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* which, if you haven't yet read it, be sure to read before you die! This extraordinary book presents our spiritual journey – or progress –in the form of allegories, or developed symbols. The main character, an Everyman, is named Christian, and his wife is Christiana. They voyage through a landscape studded with trials and obstacles such as the Slough

of Despond and they meet up with fellow itinerants who have representative names such as Hearts'ease or Temptation. As they traverse the Valley of the Shadow, John Bunyan evokes the Psalm we're discussing today, Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want," he prays, and Christian crosses over and through the dangerous declivity and emerges into bright sunshine, the golden towers and gilded streets of the Celestial City shining up ahead. He weeps with joy after his journey, and so do we. We weep with him because, instinctively and with the eyes of faith, we recognize the trials and tribulations we are, even now, enduring and which, with God's help we will pass triumphantly through. Life is not easy, but, Lord, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

As we pursue this pilgrimage called life, we have, as George Herbert said in his poem "Prayer," "the soul in paraphrase/the heart in pilgrimage." Our soul is in "paraphrase": that it soars alongside the verses of Scripture, speaking them aloud and summarizing their spiritual meaning: "I fear no evil, for You are with me"; our heart is in pilgrimage as we labor along the Way of the Cross, bearing in the backpack of our breasts the baggage of our worries, our fears and our joys: "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

And we arrive, finally, exhausted and thirsty for that Water which is eternal, finally to rest at last: "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."