

A Pilgrimage Prayer



Introduction

This Eucharistic service structure is designed for the beginning of a nature pilgrimage. Ideally, it would be celebrated out of doors at the beginning of the walk or journey.

Wendell Berry writes in his poem “A Timbered Choir” of our exile from the land as our society becomes more and more technological and urban based. He expresses his fear that, eventually, those who wish to go home “will never get there now.” This exile from the land has become a key theme in my theological reflection and ministry, especially as I work with people who live on the streets in urban contexts. Many people on the street grew up in rural areas and were part of the great urban migration in the decades following WWII and Vietnam. People on the street live as exiles, both from any actual home and often from meaningful connection to land and place. Last year, I went on a walking pilgrimage with folks from the street and was particularly struck by how important contact with the natural world was to people who sleep in the dirtiest and least desirably parts of our cities. We live in a time when our lust for power and resources has outweighed our sense of awe and reverence for creation. People on the street often are subject to the worst of our ecological plight—heavy pollution, accumulation of vast amounts of garbage, industrial waste, dirty water supplies, and the drabness of the parts of the city the rest of us do not want to see. There is a great pastoral need to connect people who live on the street with the natural world of God's creation.

A theology of exile, imbedded in the stories of land and longing for land that make up so much of the biblical story, is helpful. Underlying the text of the Hebrew Bible is the story of “the

land.” From Abraham’s call to leave his home to find a new land to the Israelite slaves freed from bondage in order to go to “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 13:5); from the stories of place names in Joshua and Judges to the yearning of the exilic prophets to return to their homeland; the theme of land and place is woven deep in the fabric of our Scriptures.

Reading a passage like Isaiah 35 on pilgrimage with people who spend their lives as wanderers is profound. It gives people in my congregation the opportunity to see themselves, not just as “the homeless,” not just as exiles, but as pilgrims, pilgrims accompanied by God, walking on a “Holy Way” (Is. 35:8). It offers a new sense of identity and new sense of purpose. Isaiah 35 offers the hope that we will all, one day, come home and that home will be beautiful, restful, and joyful.

My goal in this nature pilgrimage is to theologically and literally move from a place of exile to a place of discovery and sacramentality, if only for a brief time. Creation gives us this gift. Throughout the Psalms, we hear the singers of Israel expressing their experiences of God in creation metaphors. Jesus himself uses the natural world to explain God and God’s work and often goes into the wilderness to pray (e.g. Mk. 6:46). The Bible mirrors for us our need and our longing to find God’s presence in God’s handiwork. We both, like Job, bow before the utter beauty and grandeur of creation (Job 42:3) and, like the Psalmist, trace the work of the Spirit as we observe the cycles of life (Ps. 104:27-30).

In a sense, as we encounter God in the earthy and the mundane, in creation, we are discovering a sacramental way of living, a way of living that can sustain us wherever we are. To celebrate Eucharist in this context is to highlight this sacramentality. The bread and the wine represent Jesus in solidarity with our exile and the sacramental nature of earthy, tangible things.

This liturgy will be designed to both mirror our own sense of exile from home and celebrate how we can encounter God in the world God has made. It reflects my own longing and hope that those on the street might “lie down to rest among the pines and rise refreshed for their work” (Holy Women, Holy Men, p. 337).

Order of Service

Opening Acclamation: “Blessed be our God.
Forever and ever. Amen.” (EOW1 p. 50)

Song: “Come by Here”/Kumbyya
(This song is chosen both for its simplicity and its request that God be present with us as we go.)

Collect: “Jesus, you are the way through the wilderness: show us your truth in which we journey, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit be in us the life that draws us to God. Amen.” (EOW1 p. 52)

Psalm 23

Lesson: Isaiah 35:1-10

Reflection: Instead of a sermon, each person, as they prepare for our nature pilgrimage, will reflect on why they are going and what they hope to come back with.

Prayer: Open with an extemporaneous prayer for our endeavor, highlighting our search for God in the context of God’s creation, then open up space for the prayers of the community. Invite people to end their prayers with the words “Lord, in your mercy” and the community will respond “hear our prayer.”

The Peace

Song: “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah”

Eucharistic Prayer: Can use my Eucharist Prayer for the Street, EOW’s Prayer 2, or an extemporaneous Eucharist.

Closing: Each pilgrim will receive a blessing and a small token of their journey (perhaps a prayer scarf).

Prayer: Jesus, our good companion, on many occasions you withdrew with your friends for quiet and refreshment: Be present with your servants in these places we go for fellowship and recreation; and make them a place of serenity and peace; in your name we ask it. Amen. (From *The Book of Occasional Services*, p. 149).