

Lent 2C 2025
Luke 13:31-35
The Rev. Dr. Kathy Kelly

I want to remind you this morning of our lenten devotional book. Copies of this book are still available in the parish hall. The book is all about the pilgrimage of lent. The opening pages of the devotional say that we should gear up for lent. Gear up our hearts, as it were, and get our hearts and minds set on the challenges and rewards of the lenten pilgrimage.

The book first invites the reader to consider a time in your life when you went to visit a sacred place. “Some of you may have made a physical pilgrimage to a holy place, perhaps a shrine or special church, a trip to Jerusalem or a walk along the Camino in Spain.” The book goes on to invite us to join the many who make pilgrimages to the National Cathedral, a pilgrimage I have made and will never forget.

I can relate to the invitation to a pilgrimage to a holy place in other ways. One pilgrimage for me was in 2022 when I visited Iona in Scotland and learned all about pilgrimage and the way the original 6th century monks originally ended up in that particular holy place. I also learned all about why Iona is considered so sacred, or a “thin place”.

I can also think of finding sacredness in my own backyard: the willow tree in the yard of my childhood home, that creek I loved to wade in and fish as a youth, the campfire circle full of laughter and love on a weekend camping trips, or just my garden, as it is today. These too are sacred spaces.

Our devotional book goes on to say that “the season of Lent is (all) about pilgrimage - (Lent is) a journey to a sacred place, the desire to draw nearer to Jesus. While this pilgrimage can be a physical journey, for most of us the journey is a spiritual one. But whether we walk uneven ground or make our way in the comfort of our homes and churches, we need nourishment for the journey.

So, I want to invite you this week to consider the pilgrimage of your own heart this lenten season. And I also want you to consider how that pilgrimage brings you to this particular sacred space, this sanctuary, this pew, this altar, this parish family.

There has always been in the human spirit a longing to follow the divine nature. Mystics throughout history have held the believe that we carry this divine nature with us from birth. Children are seen as more divine or innocent than adults and we know that we tend to lose touch with our inner selves as we grow toward adulthood.

I am excited and moved to know that some of you have created a new space for exploring that *older* end of the pilgrimage of life. You have done this with an invitation to journey together and explore all the blessings of *late* life. I think you are calling this “aging fruitfully” - well done!

We are all pilgrims on a journey, whether we like that metaphor or not. Life is like that. The more meaning we can gain along the way, the richer our lives will be.

But pilgrimage takes perspective. We look forward and we look back and we look for the balance of living each day in the present. We long to return to God, the God of our childhood or youth, our earliest experiences of the loving God. We also long to pin God down and figure God out and long to squeeze the telling of our futures out of this same God. That doesn't usually go well, as you know.

But pilgrimage is all about returning, returning to the divinity of our own heart or hearts.

Early Celtic monks so longed for returning to the divinity of their own hearts that they would reach out to any experience of God and, in some ways “test” it. There is criticism for testing God, but some expressions of it include following the Holy Spirit so far as to throw caution to the wind - literally.

I learned on my pilgrimage to Scotland that in the 6th Century, monks in Ireland and other places would board a small, one person round vessel and push off shore allowing only wind and wave to guide them. No sail, nor a paddle. I assume they took something to eat.

These one man, round vessels were called oracles. They were small and round, no bigger than a garden table. Some have wondered if Moses was placed in one as an infant. There was a larger more traditionally shaped boat of that era called a Currach in which a group could row, but either way you had to go where nature took you.

That is how St. Columba ended up in Scotland on the small island of Iona - his oracle just happened to land there when he left Ireland.

Monks began to take this on as an exercise in trust, allowing their little boat to be carried by the Spirit. I imagine most them landed right back where they started, just a few miles south. But some, like St. Columba and his monks landed across the sea in places like Iona.

So my invitation today is for us to consider how we have gone on pilgrimages in the past and how we still seek God in this way, through letting go of what holds us back, through boldly

following God's call for our lives, and by listening to that still small voice in our heart of hearts. How can we step into that boat with no oars or sails and just let the wind lead us?

Jesus talks a lot about Jerusalem in today's Gospel reading. Let's look at the context of his lament for a moment through some thoughts of one of the scholars.

The first thing to understand is that Jerusalem was the center of the world. The center of the world was in the Temple, which was in Jerusalem, and the precise center was the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was located at the westernmost end of the Temple building and was a cube: 20 cubits by 20 cubits by 20 cubits. The inside of this box contained the Ark of the Covenant, gilded inside and out, in which was placed the Tablets of Stone on which the Ten Commandments were written.

If something is holy, it is uncanny; it takes your breath away. Things that are holy, to echo Rudolf Otto, are "wholly other." (Or even "Wholly Other.") Things that are holy are Wholly Other.

And that fits the Holy of Holies as well. In the middle of a city full of clamor, the Holy of Holies was a dim, quiet place. Empty except for the tablets. Silent. The Holy of Holies was the place where God's finger touched the wild, chaotic world and held it still. It was a place that stood silent and empty through the year, except for the rare occasion on which a designated priest would enter the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur and bring forth news. This was all because a place of such catastrophic importance was not to be trifled with.

The priest would enter that Wholly Other space, carry out ritual acts to *bring the world back into balance*, and then emerge and speak the Divine Name to the waiting crowd. YHWH. You have to sort of blow to try to say it. YHWH. The creative breath of God is reenacted when we do this.

According to the rabbis, the unpronounceable Divine Name YHWH is linked to the mercy attribute of God, as well as to the word God spoke to create the world. So when the priest emerged from the Holy of Holies, he would recreate the world by naming the God Whose Name Is Mercy.

YHWH

Pope Francis, who, by the way is reportedly getting better each day after his recent bout with pneumonia, published a book in 2016 on this understanding of the name of God as connected with mercy. He said in this book that the word "'mercy' derives from misericordis,

which means *opening one's heart to wretchedness*. . . . It is God's giving himself to us, accepting us, and bowing to forgive. Jesus said he came not for those who were good but for the sinners.”

In each of us, our heart of hearts needs to be rent open to this mercy.

You may also notice this is written on these lovely altar hangings. The word is repeated three times: miserere, miserere, miserere. We are called here to open our heart of hearts to reveal our own wretchedness.

But Jesus is our holy of holies.

Jesus came among us to bring the world back into balance. In Luke's story, Jesus comes from a family that goes up to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals every year, “as usual” it says in the reading. We have to remember the sacredness of the place of Jerusalem for Jesus.

Also remember that Jesus is not like you. He is a Jew of the first century, and Jerusalem is, for him, the center of the world. When he says, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” he is grieving for the city that he loves.

And the Pharisees join him. The Pharisees also loved this city at the center of the world. They loved it as much as Jesus did, and they hated what Rome (and the collaborationist Sadducees) had made of it. They seem to have been listening at the beginning of chapter 13 of Luke's gospel when Jesus talked about Pilate's murder of some Galileans, mingling their blood with their sacrifices. In this story, oddly enough, the Pharisees ally with Jesus. They warn him that Herod wants to kill him. And then they join him in their shared grief of their beloved city now occupied.

The Messiah has more allies than you might imagine. So do you. Recognizing that is how you prepare to welcome the one coming in the Name of the God Whose Name Is Mercy.¹

What then have you been pondering as I quote this lovely scholar stuff about the context of Jesus' lament over Jerusalem? Have you remembered a pilgrimage in your life? Have you thought of a holy of holies in your own life? A thin place or two? What are the deepest longings in your heart of hearts?

One answer to all of this wondering is the Holy Eucharist. We love this space. We love the stained glass and the California Redwood paneling and most all the many memories of

¹ Richard W. Swanson, *The Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-1331-35-6> accessed 03/15/2025.

practicing our faith together through the years within these four walls. But it is our weekly, for some bi-weekly, practice of engaging the sacrament of our Lord's Supper which reconnects us each time to our faith.

It is the great sacrament which keeps us connected to that rebalancing act God gives us in this holy of holies.

And that is the most beautiful description of our faith. We listen to God through our most vulnerable moments. We let go of our sinful ways as best we can and we step into that boat with no oars or sails and allow God to send us forth without fear of where we will land. We are renewed by his body and blood. We are renewed by the prayers, both ancient and new. And we leave here feeling better.

That's great.

But there is a problem in this practice if it is just about you and God. If you, the individual, come here to feel better but don't love your neighbor, you are coming up short in your boat ride with God. If you treat these sacramental rites as something to set your world, in your way, under your terms, back into a perceived balance, you may be missing something.

Because Jesus brings a new perspective. When we enter the holy of holies from that place of our heart of hearts and the world is set back in balance, we may indeed feel *off* balance at first. This is because we are stepping into the actual balance of God's way, perhaps from the unbalance of our own way. If it leaves us wobbly at first, it may be because we haven't let go of our need for control, our world view, our desires, our opinions.

When we finally let go and take that courageous step into God's balance, and God's way, we may feel spun around at first. But our faith and God's loving action in our lives leads us out of our own dizziness and back into the reality of the Way of Love where we eventually land on the shores of God's mercy.

The missing key in all of this is community. We are the people of Common prayer. We are the "we" people. Coming here, or seeking pilgrimage to any sacred space is not just about you and your heart of hearts. Those individual pilgrimages and practices are necessary. But Jesus calls us to seek God together. Two by Two, the community of believers, the priesthood of all, the church.

This sacred place is a place for all. And all are welcome here. And we intend to join together on this journey, walking each other home, seeking God in humility, peace and sometimes lament.

The end of this passage has Jesus lamenting over Jerusalem, wishing he could spread his wings like a mother hen and gather all the children together. It is no mistake that the image of the spreading of wings wide enough to encompass all the children of Jerusalem parallels the spread of Jesus' arms on the cross.

The passage ends with Jesus quoting a psalm. Psalm 118 was spoken during the Passover each year, which implies that Jesus will not be in Jerusalem again until then. His connection to the Passover is clear. Our connection to the holy of holies is clear too.

Whatever it is that brings you here, brings you back or brings you forward along your journey, remember that we are in this together. We may step into our own little boat and give ourselves over to the will of God but we do this as a fleet of little boats and we are not one in the Spirit until our heart of hearts beats with all others in this sacred space, as one.

Amen.