

God, Life, and Everything "Rail Trail Pilgrimage"

Last weekend, four people joined me in walking twenty miles through rain, freezing temperatures, and buffeting winds.

By choice.

Why would we do something so insane? Because we were on pilgrimage.

To be precise, we were taking part in a Lenten pilgrimage along the Dutchess County Rail Trail, the Walkway Over the Hudson, and the Hudson Valley Rail Trail. All three trails are connected nowadays, so they made a perfect path for pilgrimage. And the weather was perfect for helping us in the very Lenten practice of contemplating our mortality.

At this point, you might say, "Wait, isn't pilgrimage a journey to a holy site, like a shrine or a saint's grave?"

Yes, it can be. But it can be so much more. A quick primer on pilgrimage might help:

Although people have been making sacred journeys for nearly as long as there have been people, in Christian tradition they began when people wanted to walk in the footsteps of Christ, specifically the journey he made on the way to the cross.

As early as the fourth century, people were writing about their pilgrimages to the Holy Land, though it seemed to be a pastime primarily for monastics and wealthy lay people.

The trend toward pilgrimage to the Holy Land continued to the time of the crusades when it became too dangerous for most people. That's when they started going to other places; the site of a saint's grave or where relics of some saint were laid - anything would do to justify the trip. With the Holy Land unavailable but the urge to travel still strong, they simply created new goals to travel to.

In short, people had figured out that they didn't really have to see the places where Christ actually walked in order to have a profound experience. The journey itself is what matters.

A lot of folks went on pilgrimage just to go somewhere. In fact, modern tourism has its roots in pilgrimage because so many so-called pilgrims just wanted to go out and see things. But those who took their faith seriously discovered that walking prayerfully, getting away from the day-to-day busy-ness of life to devote a journey's time to God could bring them closer to God. Moreover, they discovered that the physical nature of pilgrimage engaged their whole being - they were entirely engaged with God.

If there was a shrine at the end where they could ponder the life and works of a saint or some miracle, so much the better. However, the history of pilgrimage shows that the ending location is not as important as the journey.

That's why, when someone said to me there are no real holy places to go to around here, I didn't care. When I said I wanted to go on pilgrimage, what I meant was, I wanted to walk prayerfully, intentionally with God.

The problem for our little group was more that Dutchess County is not so pedestrian friendly. I drove and rode all over the county looking for roads that are safe for a group to walk along for many miles. Not to be had.

But then my wife said, "Why not the rail trails? They're connected now and made for what you want." So we did it.

Granted, the last week of March is not the ideal time for outdoors activities, but we did it anyway. On Saturday, we started with a prayer service - a commissioning of pilgrims complete with blessing of backpacks and pilgrims' tokens (an old tradition. Often the token is a scallop shell. In our case, we used Anglican rosaries).

The first problem we encountered was that the port-a-potties on the trail don't get put out until April, so we had to make adjustments in our journey to accommodate our needs. Then the rain hit and accompanied us the entire first day.

Every couple of miles we stopped to read from Luke's gospel about Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem before the events of Holy Week. We were walking to Jerusalem with him, and the weather emphasized the seriousness of that walk.

We finished the day at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church on Overlook Road in Poughkeepsie, where the congregation graciously put us up for the night. After spending the day in the elements, it felt luxurious! To a person, we all slept like rocks in our sleeping bags.

The next morning, the good people of St. Andrew's bid us Godspeed, and while they began their morning worship, we pilgrims said a quick morning prayer and continued on our way.

The second day exchanged colder temperatures and wind for the previous day's rain. We bundled up and set our faces for the Walkway.

After a couple of hours, the Walkway Over the Hudson lay before us. We could feel the increased wind before we ever set foot on it, and by the time we reached the water's edge, it felt like we were walking behind a jumbo jet. People were literally being blown sideways. Another way of looking at it was that we were walking through a trial, a test, something to launch us into the final phase of the journey.

Miraculously, when we got through to the other side, the wind ceased. The rest of our walk - just under four miles, went much more quickly. Or would have if our legs and feet didn't hurt so much.

Finally, we reached Tony Williams Park in Lloyd - our shrine. As with all pilgrimages, we performed an act of worship. In our case, we celebrated the Holy Eucharist.

Was this a "real" pilgrimage? Ask the pilgrims who went. To a person, they said it had powerful meaning - and they would do it again.

In fact, we are planning another. This one, however, will be for a warmer season!