

IPC Sermons

My Camino Experience

October 11, 2015

Psalm 84 Hebrews 4: 12-16

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It was Sunday morning. I awoke in a strange room divided into sections in a bunk bed with no one above me, although someone was in the bed next to me. I silently arose, donned my shorts and headed to the small bathroom to get ready for the day. Returned to my bed and packed my sleeping sheet by the light of my iphone and found the rest of my belongings and stuffed them in their correct places in my 20-pound blue pack. After grabbing my hiking boots I silently walked through the albergue to a small outside sitting area and filled my water bottle. It was still dark but the sun would be rising soon. I gazed at my sore feet wrapped in bandages after the specialist had cleaned and treated my wounds yesterday and wondered if I could really get them back inside those high topped hiking boots. After pulling on my woolen socks I stuffed the less injured foot into the boot... success! Then as I pushed my left toes into my boot, I felt the pain but they were in the boot! I tentatively laced my shoe, hoisted my pack on my back and took a few careful steps. Oooh, still painful, but I pushed on! I walked out of the sitting area and into the parking lot, and continued down the street, wincing with every step. Could I do this? Was this worth it? This is only Day 6 and I have only walked 113.6 kilometers with 693.2 more to go! Why am I doing this and putting my body and especially my feet through this misery! Lord, help me, and guide me through this day! Thoughts and prayers invaded my mind as I took each painful step toward the center of Puente la Reina, Spain. Finally I could take no more. With tears in my eyes I realized that I had missed my first turn. I saw a table ahead on the street and planned to sit and re-group, and perhaps adjust my boot. Three older teens, still out from their Saturday night of party-ing saw me and the boy in his drunken stupor flashed me – what was I doing here? Why am I doing this? An older women working in a nearby coffee shop saw me and tried to help, but she spoke no English and my Spanish was very poor. I realized she was asking how she could help or should she call emergency? Also, there was a room to let here but it would not be ready until noon.

This was the low point of my pilgrimage to Santiago and I truly wondered at my sanity for undertaking this Walk of 800 kilometers, with a full pack and by myself. After removing the painful boot, I purchased a pain du chocolate or Napolitana as it is called in northern Spain, and a cup of café con leche.

I found a place to sit and gazed at the Spanish news on the TV, seeing but not really paying attention. I contemplated my next steps. Should I take the room here? Should I press on in spite of the pain? What SHOULD I do? After an hour or so of indecision I decided to return to the Albergue from where I started the day – I had only walked a little over one and a half kilometers so far and that Albergue was attached to a hotel. I would get a room, rest, pray and start the next day!

Most of you know me as the wife of Pastor Murray and the choir director here at the church, but who I am really? I am those things, as well as a mother of three beautiful and grown women, a teacher, a lover of nature, a fanatic exercise geek, a Christian, and a seeker--but not necessarily in that order. But what am I seeking: perhaps a path for my life and the answers to some age-old questions? But aren't we all?

I decided to embark upon the Camino de Santiago, or the Compostella as it is often known, a year ago when Murray's sabbatical became a reality. I first heard about this pilgrimage from Gene and Caroline Foley, as well as Geert Glaas who was walking the Camino at the time Murray and I arrived here in Belgium in 2006 to begin responsibilities at the International Protestant Church. The idea sounded intriguing and appealed to my sense of adventure. And for some reason, I was drawn to the idea of a pilgrimage: a time on my own to reflect, walk, think, and talk with our great GOD. When I googled the word "pilgrimage," the first entry was:

NOUN, a pilgrim's journey, "he wanted to go on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela" Synonyms: religious journey, holy expedition, crusade, mission, trip, journey, excursion.

There were several other definitions from various sources but they all expressed the idea of a devotional journey to some sacred place. At that point, I had no idea why Santiago de Compostella was considered sacred, but the journey itself was the important part for me, not the destination. This was already a departure from my normal way of thinking of life! I am often so purpose-driven toward a goal, that the methods taken to achieve that goal are usually down-played or not considered at all!

Sooooo, the planning began. My entire family became caught up in my preparations for my pilgrimage. My daughter returned my backpack that she had borrowed. Christmas gifts were all about my trip, with quick-dry shirts, hiking socks, guide books, a head lamp, and even an iphone to replace all the electronics so there would be no need to carry a camera, a phone, and a book to read. It would also eliminate the need to make frequent stops at a computer for communication to family and friends! And the iphone also became the vehicle for my BLOG that many of you followed, which I am still in awe of how many read various episodes! Much more preparation followed including conditioning myself physically, but apparently nothing could prepare my feet for the abuse they would receive from daily walking at least 20 kilometers a day!

Soon the day of my arrival would come, and it did. I took 2 trains and a bus to St. Jean Pied de Port on Monday, May 12 and began my pilgrimage on a beautiful, chilly and foggy morning, on the edge of the Pyrenees Mountains, on May 13. It seems so long ago now, yet it has only been about 5 months! I thought when I began, I was prepared although I knew there would be surprises along the way, and there definitely were. Nothing can prepare you for the emotion of standing in the middle of a herd of sheep as they pass by you, or looking down on the world around you from a lofty precipice as the sun rises, or thinking about your life and your faith and rounding a bend as you are met full-faced with a huge cross, or watching the snails and slugs as they journey the same path that you are taking. As a side, I was told by one *hopitalier* (a person who works and runs the *albergue* or hostel) that the snails would make it to Compostella before the hikers, because they travel all night! The indescribable feeling of having a prayer answered and the emotion felt in that answer. Reaching my destination and watching the huge swinging incense burner cross the front of the cathedral during worship. All of these were things that I encountered during my pilgrimage to Compostella, and much more!

As I talk to you this morning, I really did not know where to start so I mimed the prologue on WILD, a book by Cheryl Straid who walked the Pacific Coast Trail in the United States. We both took a journey via walking, both sought answers to life, both had some foot problems but that is about where our similarity ends. Hers was a journey and mine was a pilgrimage. God was there for me and Cheryl often doubted if there truly was a God. I had a roof over my head every night and food provided by a restaurant, café or local grocery and she camped in a tent and carried her food and cooking supplies. I am not sure I could have done what she accomplished but still I feel like my Pilgrimage was and will continue to be one of the highlights of my life.

As most of you know, IPC is in the midst of a Stewardship Campaign. Now don't shut me off at this point – I know when it comes to money, the church shouldn't meddle! Or so many think. Actually, I grew up in a family that fell away from church due to a stewardship drive and a visit from a church member who wanted to talk to my parents about "giving" and tithing. But the church does need our financial gifts to survive. The theme of this year's stewardship appeal involves more than just money! And so does life. I really think that we can apply the elements of prayer, presence, gifts, service and witness to all phases of our being – if we are truly Christians and lovers of Christ.

Most of these elements were definitely a part of my life on the Camino. Every morning I would start my journey with **prayer**: Prayers for others who are important in my life, prayers for the world situation, and prayers in thanks to the Lord for the opportunity to make this Pilgrimage. At times there were certain prayer requests in which I needed guidance or answers, and one time the answer came so swiftly it brought me to tears as I thought about my parents and especially my relationship with my

mother. I definitely felt the **presence** of God on my walk and I tried to listen for His voice. As expected, other thoughts about pain or my own agenda caused me to shut my ears! But one thing is for certain – the Camino de Santiago is definitely one of those “thin places” on this earth, a place where the presence of God can be felt more strongly if you just let God into your life and listen.

As I pondered on each of the elements and tried to relate them to my pilgrimage, I struggled a bit with the idea of **gifts**. I know that I have gifts and like to share them, both financial as well as qualities that are stronger in my person perhaps than others, but how did that affect my Camino experience? Sure, I gave a few coins during the offering at the nightly Pilgrim Services conducted in a few communities and I treated a young man to dinner when I knew he was watching his budget but that really does not amount to much. I shared my singing along the way but usually to myself when others were not around. I listened to people as they told their stories and tried to care in a way that I thought best. People also cared for me, which is something I have a difficult time allowing! And perhaps, the writings in my BLOG were a special gift to my friends and family members.

Service and **witness** could possibly be looked at hand in hand. This trip was more about me, than physically helping others. But I felt I was asked to witness on many occasions. It was a logical step to talk about IPC when people would ask about my family, especially when they discovered I was married to a pastor and doing this pilgrimage without my husband. By talking about IPC it was easy to talk about my faith and God. I had several reactions from understanding and agreement, to an interest in a church that is so diverse in its people and its beliefs and truly cared for its members, to seekers not understanding a faith and a belief in God, and to one man who looked at me and said, “Do you really believe in that stuff?” You can bet that he heard a word or two after that!

I have realized that the elements of this Stewardship campaign are really a part of my everyday life, and during my Pilgrimage, they were truly writ large!

You know another comment that was often asked of me during and after my pilgrimage was if I was ever afraid or scared, especially since I was doing it alone. I made friends along the way, but early learned that it was better not to hold on to these friends. My Camino family changed daily and I was pleasantly surprised when I would encounter someone again and again. I actually found that staying with the same person for a few days was almost more difficult than being a free floater. I tried to stay smart and always have people in my sight when possible if I was walking alone, especially after I received messages from several about a woman who had gone missing on the trail only a few weeks before my start. But in actuality, I was never alone. God was always there for me, listening, talking and protecting me. He was my Rock and my Protector, I often felt “raised up” on Eagles’ wings.

Certain songs, prayers, and verses became standard to my days on the Camino. We have sung a few today, and will later sing “How Great Thou Art!” which will be accompanied with some of my pictures

from the experience. My mantra when ascending a daunting hill was “You are my God and my Rock, in you will I trust.” I don’t know how many times I uttered that phrase, but it definitely made my way easier. I would like to end with a song that had great meaning to me, especially in my troubled times. No, I was never alone, in spite of many adversities. I can’t believe that I actually finished the St. James Way of the Camino de Compostella across northern Spain in 33 days and by walking 800 kilometers or 500 miles from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago de Compostella. It definitely was a journey made by the grace of GOD.

Sing: You’ll Never Walk Alone

When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of the storm
There's a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark

Walk on through the wind
Walk on through the rain
Though your dreams be tossed and blown
Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone.