

[May I speak in the name of the Father,] Son and Holy Spirit.

I've been fascinated by the idea of a holy pilgrimage ever since learning about Camino de Santiago 18 years ago when a priest friend of mine made that pilgrimage as a part of his sabbatical. The stories he told were incredible and moving about the way God worked on his heart during that arduous journey.

This interest led me to read the story of our parishioner, Edie Sunby. Many of you have read her book. She became a pilgrim while fighting cancer and worked the mission trail. She describes it in detail in her wonderful book, *The Mission Walker*.

Pilgrimage is something you may be familiar with. There are pilgrimage sites all over the world. The Camino de Santiago pilgrimage, also known as "The Way of Saint James" is an ancient path taken by thousands of pilgrims every year, usually on foot, for over 500 miles through Spain.

There are actually nine different routes for this pilgrimage, but the most popular route begins in France and then winds through that beautiful Spanish countryside, through grassy deserts, lush forests and mountains as it heads south into Santiago. All of the routes end up in Santiago at Saint James Cathedral, or the Santiago de Compostela.

These pilgrims arrive and they can attend a daily pilgrim mass. The cathedral is a very unique holy site because it's where the body of Saint James lies, Saint James the Greater, our patron saint, who of course we're celebrating today on this Saint James Day, is buried.

Saint James was one of Jesus' 12 disciples. He was a fisherman who abandoned everything to follow Jesus along with his brother John. James later went to Spain to preach the good news. James is the patron saint of Spain. Legend has it that James' body, after he was martyred in the year 44 by beheading while he was visiting Jerusalem, was taken back to Spain by ship. As his body was being brought back ashore, the horse and rider assisting

the transfer fell into the water, but were miraculously saved.

It is said that when they arrived back on shore and emerged from the water, they were covered in scallop shells. These shells, which also adorn our own Saint James logo, which you can see on the bulletin, is all over our church. If you start looking, you'll see shells everywhere, the back stained glass, our doors. It's all throughout the church, in the chapel. But these shells are found throughout the coast of Galicia near Saint James' tomb. Pilgrims who began their journey to the cathedral as pilgrims, this started well more than a thousand years ago, did so as penance and spiritual renewal.

Once a pilgrim reached their destination, they were required to get a souvenir as evidence of having made the journey. They were given this scallop shell, a shell from the coast as proof.

Of course, it didn't take too long for vendors to figure out they could just sell the shells to people outside the cathedral, but it's said that these ancient pilgrims used the shells as bowls for food and water for those offering hospitality. Eventually, the scallop shell itself, associated with Saint James and with the Camino, became the primary symbol of pilgrimage. It is found everywhere along these trails as markers for pilgrims to follow.

Pilgrimage has always been an apt symbol for our faith journey. The letter to the Hebrews describes us as pilgrims and strangers on the Earth. Pilgrimage reminds us that our time on Earth is a journey. It is a journey to our unity with God, heaven bound.

Along that way, we are beckoned to stop and to pray, keeping our eyes set on the goal and on our destination. Like life, the Camino pilgrimage is not without its challenges. Not only is it a long walk of hundreds of miles, but there are hikes over mountain ranges and challenging terrains. Pilgrims will often struggle with various ailments, blisters, foot sores, sore muscles, along with the occasional injury. Sometimes, there's little water or food available and of course, weather is always a

consideration. It can range from brutal heat to rain and mud and even snow.

Like life, there are a variety of experiences. There are beautiful and wonderful things to do and see along the way as well. Then, there are the people, all those fellow pilgrims on the Camino. The primary greeting when you're on the trail is "Buen Camino", wishing you a good journey on your way. "Buen Camino."

Some pilgrims travel with you for many miles or days and they become good friends. Others travel for just a short while, maybe over a meal or a stay at a hostel, but each person makes their impact on the way.

Pilgrimage is this apt metaphor for life and shells. These beautiful scallop shells, a symbol for pilgrimage, is an ideal symbol of our faith. Many churches use shells for baptism. We here at Saint James perform our baptisms with a silver scallop shell. Not only does it have that practical use of holding water, but it symbolizes the start of the Christian journey that we all take at baptism because you and I, we are on nothing less than an earthly pilgrimage, all moving toward the holy and heavenly city of God.

Now, one of the most popular Psalms that's chosen for funerals is the Psalm that we read today, Psalm 23, a very beloved Psalm. The reason I believe it's so often chosen is because it so accurately describes our Earthly pilgrimage.

It begins with the words: "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want", or "not be in want." This is the reminder that we don't pilgrimage alone. We have a good shepherd leading us and when we follow God, we lack nothing.

One of the Camino pilgrims said this, she said, "After going with only two pairs of underwear and clothing for a month, I realize just how little I really needed."

God provides for us and for what we really need when we stay close to God. If we wander off, there's no telling what might happen.

I have two very young children and I can tell you that walks can be tricky. Just keeping them on the sidewalk or on the trail is the first challenge. On way more than one occasion, my son has seen something very interesting and bolted across the street to get it. When we hike, we love to hike in Torrey Pines. I have to keep them very close to me. Always, they're required to be on the side of me farthest from the cliffs and drops at all times, but as their mother, I'm always there to pick them up if they fall down and I am constantly scanning where we're going, aware of the trail, aware of any danger on the path. When they stick with me, and trust me, I tell them this, all will be well. So too it is for us. We are safe when we stick with God during our pilgrimage of life.

The Psalm continues: "He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters." God invites us to places of rest. I know it's very easy to forget this in our very busy culture, but time for rest and sabbath are absolutely essential to our wellbeing. A green pasture is one that's covered with vegetation and with new grass. It is nourishing and it is comfortable to sit and rest on, even sleep. Still waters are waters that are very safe to wade into. They're easy to drink from. This lovely word for "still" in Hebrew means "resting place", this stillness. God leads us to these still resting places, but we need to actually take advantage of those moments. Stop and rest when those opportunities provide themselves for us on our journey. We need to pause. We need to get enough sleep. We need to take time off. This pilgrimage of ours won't last forever, so please make sure you pause and enjoy it.

It continues: "He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for His name's sake." It is when we have all that nourishment and rest that we need for our souls and bodies that we're able to be revived and restored to good health. When we're restored, then we're able to manage to make that walk along the pathways God is leading us on, those paths of righteousness.

The pilgrims on the Camino, they talk a lot about how important it is to get that rest and to be

revived by the company of others. Even time alone and time with God. Only then, they say, can they continue their trek all the way to Santiago.

"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." At the same time, our pilgrimage is not without its valleys. Sometimes, valleys as terrifying as the shadow of death. This Hebrew concept for shadow of death refers to great darkness, places of danger, even the grave itself, and yet many will tell you, it is in those most difficult, those most challenging times in life when we can sense God's presence with us most keenly. We are not alone in the dark. We are not alone when we feel overcome by fear in such challenging times.

This rod, the shepherd's staff that's described, it has a crook on the end. The crook is there to grab the sheep as they begin to travel off the path. It brings them back to safety, helps them find their way.

In this pilgrimage of life, we will face those dark and dangerous and very painful times, but we will never be traveling alone. Often, help comes in the form of fellow pilgrims. The Camino pilgrims will say they felt safe on the pilgrimage because they were surrounded by so many kind fellow pilgrims, all seeking the same goal. We pilgrimage together.

"You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me. You have anointed my head with oil and my cup runneth over." This word for "enemy" means "present distress". Even in our presence of distress, God is providing for us, but again, we have to notice God's provisions. God is always offering us help, blessing us with that healing oil, symbol for healing, with a cup that runs over. This is symbolic of God's abundance. God doesn't just bless us a little bit. God's blessings overflow the boundaries and expectations we set. The Camino pilgrims say their journey blessed them in ways they never could have imagined.

Finally, "You're goodness and mercy shall follow me all of the days of my life. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." This pilgrimage with

God leads to a knowledge and experience of what's called "hesed". This is God's mercy. We translate it as "mercy", but it means "loving kindness".

Hesed is not a momentary thing. Hesed is what goes with us our entire lives. It is a lifelong experience of God, because our pilgrimage will reach its end and we are invited to dwell at that end in the house of the Lord forever.

You are all pilgrims. We are pilgrims. My fellow pilgrims, remember God is with you. Saint James and the saints are there to encourage you. This community welcomes you and loves you, all of you fellow pilgrims, wherever you come from. The end of our pilgrimage is so much better than our best imaginings. Keep walking and Buen Camino!