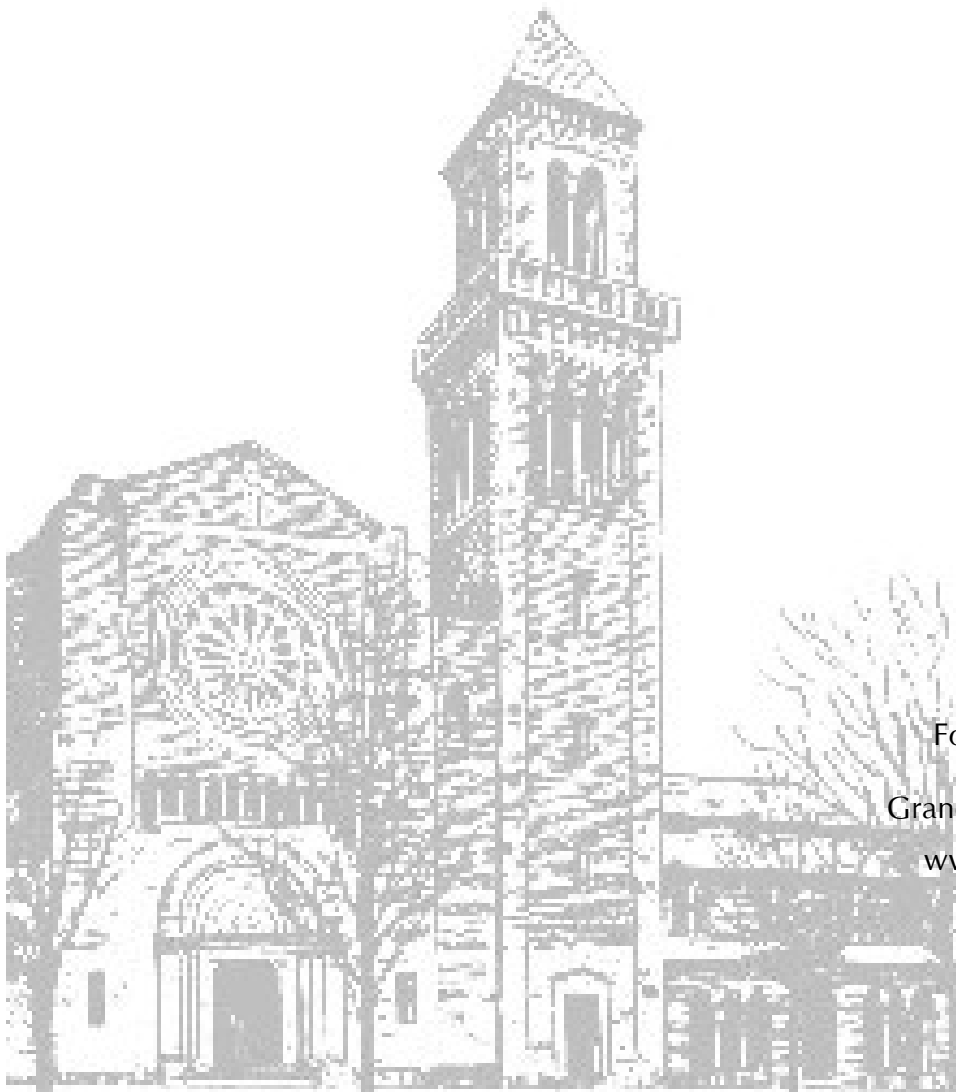


# “Hermit Songs”

Sunday, March 11, 2007

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**To the reader:** This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

# A Journey Into Spirit - " Hermit Songs"

## **An Invitation**

"Pity me on my pilgrimage to Loch Derg," it begins. The ten songs that comprise "Hermit Songs" are the words of medieval Irish monks. Whether on actual pilgrimage or in the figurative sense that a monastic life entails, these anonymous folk found that far from leaving the world behind, everything they thought they left was still there – boredom, longing, anger, hope, despair, even lust. To be a monk is not to escape the world but to engage its doppelganger, its mirror twin, your own soul. To retreat from the outside is to turn to the inside, and see there the same landscape as one left, and thence to travel it, if only symbolically, as one would a pilgrim on the way to Compostela, Rome, Mecca, Karbala, and lesser places like Loch Derg.

There are not as many pilgrims as there used to be. "The world is too much with us," says William Wordsworth, who exactly two centuries ago bade us retreat from the "getting and spending" where we "lay waste our powers." Did we listen? Daily we are told who we are, where we should be, and how we should get there. Our world is nothing but a vast market where life is reduced to "getting and spending."

And our longing to find ourselves is now a market in itself – whether we are transported by iPods that give us soundtracks for our lives, or we head home to become Internet denizens where we can live in imaginary perfection, or we watch American Idol and the newest Netflix movie and project ourselves onto the unreal screen that seems somehow more real than our lives.

But we humans need to be pilgrims, real pilgrims, who, as Thoreau determined, sought to "live deliberately... to learn what life has to teach and not, when I come to die, discover I have not lived."

This day, in a season of spiritual pilgrimage called Lent, is a time to walk with ancient monks and hear their words rendered in music, much as great painters rendered them in form. Listen for your soul in theirs, your sorrows, your longings, your fears, your life. It is there, and along the way I shall complement them with some words of my own and a few others as well.

The first song reminds us that a pilgrimage is often hard; "pity me" it begins. The second reminds us of the tension between flesh and the spirit, which is at the heart of pilgrimage.

### *At Saint Patricks' Purgatory Church Bell At Night*

## **Visions**

Some years ago, a company marketed a sensory deprivation tank with the promise that it could provide the benefits of years of spiritual discipline in a fraction of the

time. I hope it failed. My elder son bemoans our short-cut society, where everything can be done faster than before. Time is a wastin' and only the organized will be able to complete law school, make their millions, see the world, and reach Nirvana before forty.

We like to say the journey is the destination, but we don't mean it. Despite the eloquent words of Thoreau and Wordsworth and their modern cousins Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry, the pilgrim life, the spiritual life, is just too slow for most of us. I feel it as much as anyone, propelled by the universal sense that time is limited for us all. And what's worse, it seems to go faster and faster, making this little passage even briefer as we each accelerate until we make our Thelma and Louise exit at the last.

We want to stand still, but can't. Let me propose a compromise, then. Walk in circles. That sounds useless, until you hear the Greek equivalent: peripatetic. It means to walk around, but we mean philosophical. Aristotle walked as he taught. His students had to follow him around, it seems, through the grove of academe. It worked. Charles Darwin also walked around, followed the same path every day as he thought out his ideas. There is some research that walking and thinking enhance each other, especially the thinking part.

So our pilgrimage is not only to find ourselves as we go, but to find out where we are in the scheme of things. And the motion is always relative. The 15<sup>th</sup> century Indian poet Kabir said, "I felt in need of a great pilgrimage, so I sat still for three days, and God came to me." However you meet up, the result is a vision – something that says who you are and where you are in the scheme of things. Our pilgrimages are to visions, then. And the next two songs are visions that do just that. In listening, imagine who you might be and where you are in the scheme of things. Don't get grandiose. Remember the Muslim poet and saint, Rabiah, who said, "It helps, putting my hands on a pot, on a broom, in a wash pail. I tried painting, but it was easier to fly slicing potatoes."

***St. Ita's Vision***  
***The Heavenly Banquet***

**Sorrows**

I was younger than many clergy when sorrow found me. The story is worth its own hour, which this is not, but in that sorrow I saw something I did not like. We religious liberals are not good at grief. Not that I craved for consolation and assurance. What I did need was a faith that knows that sorrow and grief and sadness are as real as happiness and peace and joy.

But liberal religion is uneasy with sorrow. Perhaps because it has no easy answer to explain it, we simply shy away and hope it will pass, like a gas pain. This was when I discovered the Kaddish, a tradition in Judaism that each week pauses to acknowledge those in mourning. Without saying heaven waits or that all will be OK, the ritual simply asks those in mourning to take the lead in reading the last iteration of a prayer used several times in the service. In that way, those who grieve can wear their grief openly, and in leading the prayer show that sometimes it is sorrow that opens the doorways of faith.

The Baal Shem Tov, Israel ben Eliezer, the founder of Hasidism once told the story of the man who practiced for weeks to master the blowing of the shofar at Rosh Hashanah. When the moment came, he failed and ran from the synagogue in tears. The rabbi found him later, sobbing that he had failed to open the gates to heaven as the tradition holds. The rabbi then told him, "When you lose the key to a locked door, the only way in is with an axe. The broken heart breaks down the doorways to God as surely as the prayer." I doubt the Puritan John Bunyan knew this story when he said, "Often the best prayers are more groans than words."

In these songs sorrow is the heart of faith. Perhaps you will find that they touch your sorrow as well, though the words be not yours. Say what you will, the groan of sorrow is a language we all share.

***The Crucifixion***  
***Sea-Snatch***

**Joys**

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked, says Kahlil Gibran. Those who would rejoice must create a space to contain it. That's what sorrow does. It scours out a place to hold our joy. Those who would scale the greatest heights must be willing to descend to the deepest depths. And when we do, the middling world of everyday life takes on a healthier perspective as well. "I laugh when I hear the fish is thirsty," says Kabir. "That's how wacky things have gotten." Rabiah does not hesitate to scold God a bit, saying "There is a dog I sometimes take for a walk and turn loose in a field. When I can't give her that freedom I feel in debt. I hope God thinks like that and is keeping track of all the bliss he owes me." And Meister Eckhart, the medieval Christian mystic, also had a sense of humor, "The Lord told me a joke, and seeing him laugh has done more for me than any scripture."

Three short songs with the joy of life in them – wry, sweet, ecstatic. "So amazing this choir of socks, shoes, shirts, skirts, undergarments, earth, sky, suns and moons," says Rabiah. "No wonder I too, now, sing all day." There are as many ways to be joyful as there are days.

***Promiscuity***  
***The Monk And His Cat***  
***The Praises of God***

**Prayers, spoken...**

The journey that is this morning is drawing toward an end. The clock, artificial thing that it is, will strike noon presently, itself an artificial moment. Much as life itself, which begins we know not exactly when or where and ends likewise. I have observed that the soul collects itself over time, perhaps the result of some ethereal spiritual gravity that pulls the cloud of thoughts and memories and feelings together until a person emerges much as a star in the firmament. And it disperses much the same, so that there is no tidy border between life and death.

It is good to pause now, and think on this from John of the Cross: "You might quiet the whole world for a second if you pray. But if you loved, if you really love, guns will wilt."

### *The Desire For Hermitage*

**...and silent**

#### **Drawing from the Well**

Among Christian churches, the readings for this time of year are about water. In one, Isaiah bids people to come eat and drink in a land newly refreshed, a text we will sing as our closing hymn. In another Moses provides water to the Children of Israel in the wilderness by striking a rock at Meribah. In another, Jesus speaks with a Samaritan woman about living waters.

We call this Fountain Street Church, and I wonder if we should not take that name seriously. Are we not in search of living waters? Are not all who come here seeking to find that "dearest freshness deep down" as Gerard Manley Hopkins called it? And are we ready to drink it when it bubbles up, be it from the plains of Meribah, a well in Samaria, the endless tears of human sorrow, the dripping sweat of human toil, the cataracts of nature or the pulsings of blood through our common veins?

Our pilgrimage, friends, every season not just this Lenten one, is to the fountain that lies beneath the baked clay of daily life, the dirt trodden down by our feet as they walk about in search of life, not realizing the water we seek is right here, right now. Have we the courage, the faith, to look beneath our feet, to believe that the living waters are not far away but hidden in our own lives, if we had but the courage to strike the rock of our clenched hearts, to break our own hearts in two, and let the waters burst forth.