

REFLECTIONS ON MOUNTAINS AND HOLY PLACES

TRANSFIGURATION 2017

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How interesting that in the first week back in the pulpit after my sabbatical, I have a story of Jesus going off to a mountain to pray and transformation. That type of “coincidence” has been the theme of my entire sabbatical and in particular my time on the Camino de Santiago. So much of my time was filled with being in the right place at the right time because I followed the leading of the Spirit.

My spiritual director from the Jesuit Center told me to go with loose reins, in other be open to being led and directed. Let this horse go where it wanted to go and enjoy the journey. I did just that all the while remembering that I was on a journey where I consciously looked for the divine in everything, every person, every situation, every place where I traveled. I was richly rewarded.

A little context for today's passage and my reflections upon it. Chapter 9 of Luke is pivotal in that it includes the sending out of the disciples, the question by Herod who is this Jesus, the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, followed by Jesus asking the disciples who do people say I am, then his asking Peter who do you say I am and ending with the transfiguration. That's quite a bit for 57 verses.

Now about mountains, prayer and transformation. If I didn't live near the ocean or a large body of water I would live in the mountains. There is a beauty and a grandeur that just speaks to my heart. I've experienced that out in my sister's condo in Utah, in my visits to Ashville and other mountain locations. In walking the Camino you begin with mountains and return to mountains several times. Now the challenge is that you start at the base of a mountain range.

The guidebook that I used broke the Camino into 33 stages. The first stage takes you over the last of the Pyrenees mountains and begins in St. John de Pied de Port. Now St. John is about 500 feet above sea level. In the course of 30 kilometers, which is 19 miles I climbed up to an altitude of 5200 feet according to the compass app on my phone. Fortunately John Baldwin and others had told me to break it into two stages and I'm very glad I did. It was wise advice since I had been traveling for a month already and had not been training that much.

As I set out that first day to go to a little place called Orisson, it was foggy, misty and downright damp. Just walking for the first 30 minutes I was soaked. The climb was straight up for 3 hours without any flat area. Think in terms of the path up from the James River at Chanco going on for 3 or 4 hours. As I left the little village of St. Jean I really couldn't see more than 50 ft. I was alone and started to really listen when I heard something in the distance. It was a cowbell from across the valley or maybe just down the hillside. As I continued to walk I heard the sound of a small creek or river down at

the bottom of the valley. I was actually thinking about the transfiguration passage and the cloud that descended and the voice. I had not yet looked ahead to this Sunday's sermon.

Walking in that fog I became very aware of just how much information I was gathering by listening. For a portion I was walking on a small road, think in terms of the road approaching Chanco, about a car and a half wide. So I heard long before I saw the few cars that I encountered. I was thinking as I walked, wow I wish I could see the scenery but then realized I was experiencing this bit of the Camino in a unique way, one that was repeated several times as I walked in the mountains. Think about when you have encountered the holy. Was it a surprise?

This was a portion of the Camino where the cyclists were on the same path as those walking on foot. As I struggled through my second hour of climbing a cyclist from Brazil slowly approached. Pedaling in a very low gear he was next to me and said, "Are you wondering what the heck you are doing here?" I laughed and agreed to that quick thought. As he slowly rode off, it really was that steep, I then thought, actually I know exactly why I am here. I am a pilgrim on a slow challenging journey seeking the holy. I was aware that in that mist and fog, the holy was to be found. The holy was in the mist and fog just as much as in the glorious sunshine that I experienced the next day once I got above the fog and continued into the wonderful sunshine of the alpine meadows of those mountains. It was a holy lesson in patience and endurance.

When I got to Orisson dripping wet with sweat and damp from the fog I stopped at the little albergue and had what I came to call my second breakfast, I thought well I could go on. However I had already booked and paid for the room and I remembered the advice of don't go on so I stayed. That night at the albergue in the fog that lasted all day and night I met an incredible group of pilgrims, many of whom I walked with for much of the Camino. In meeting them I had a holy experience. In these early stages very few were there just for the walk, most were on a true pilgrimage.

I met a group of Germans who had started at their hometown in Germany. For each of the last 6 years they have walked for two weeks. This year they were walking from St. Jean to Pamplona. Next year they will resume from Pamplona. One had carried a guitar and he pulled it out after dinner and they began to sing and we had a wonderful night. By the way the songs were not religious, they were Peter, Paul and Mary along with other "protest" songs from the 60s and 70s, not what I expected.

I met Chris age 75 who left her home in Antwerp Belgium on April 15 and had already walked 1000 kilometers by the time I met her. She struggled through the heat that was to come and did in fact finish about a week after I did. Then there was Reilly who I walked with for several weeks and others too numerous to mention many of whom ended up in Santiago together. You see if I had made that day about a destination rather than a journey I would have missed all of these people.

In the cloud on the mountain in our gospel the true nature of Jesus was revealed to Peter, John and James. They did not come up on the mountain with Jesus looking for this information. In fact just like in the garden on Maundy Thursday they had trouble staying awake. Yet they had a profound encounter with the holy because they were where they were supposed to be. Yet the passage ends with the statement that they didn't say anything about this experience. Now stop and think about that, how would you explain that to someone?

Well I understand that. Over the coming months as I try to convey to you some of what I experienced especially on the Camino I have a huge challenge. Sometimes you have experiences that just cannot be described in words or pictures. Encounters with the holy often cannot be reduced to words. I can tell you and will tell you the story of Terry and Nicola with the altar guild at the convent in Sahagun, but it will be difficult to explain what actually happened in terms of our encounter with the holy. I can tell you about walking through the mountain pass and looking out at the glory of the Meseta, the huge flat expanse of farmland that stretched for a week's worth of walking. However it is what has changed in me that is the gift of the Camino and I am still working on all the implications that this holds for me. This has been a life-changing experience and I will try to share as much of it as I can.

This time on the Camino really taught me the value of experiencing the journey, putting the attention on the journey and not just on the final destination. They say that your Camino really begins when you leave Santiago and I have found that to be very true. So over the next few months I hope to take you along as my Camino continues, but this time it is here at St. Aidan's.