

## Spiritual Practice for April – Pilgrimage (Part 1)

“When in April the sweet showers fall ... then people long to go on pilgrimage.” So begins Geoffrey Chaucer’s 14<sup>th</sup> century masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*. But pilgrimage is not simply an outdated practice from the Middle Ages. It has been practiced by women and men of many cultures and faiths for over two millenia, and it continues to inspire people to this day.

What is pilgrimage? Many definitions exist, but I prefer one of the simplest: an outward journey that sets in motion an inward journey. Although the word has made its way into secular vocabulary to convey any journey with personal meaning, even to visiting a pop idol’s home (think Elvis’s Graceland), I want to concentrate on a more traditional understanding, involving journeying to holy places with the intent of being transformed spiritually.

It is this emphasis on sacred desire that distinguishes pilgrimage from tourism. The pandemic has made many people, myself included, eager to resume traveling, both to beloved familiar places as well as intriguing new ones. But the pandemic, brutal though it has been in terms of loss of life and freedom, has also given us the opportunity to reflect on what is most important and meaningful. Now may be the time to express your sacred desire by making a pilgrimage to a holy place.

In her book *Pilgrimage: The Sacred Art*, Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook describes three kinds of sacred places: *memory places*, where pilgrims gather to commemorate an event or person of special significance; *quiet places*, which offer freedom from distractions and invite prayer and healing; and *Divine activity places*, known as “thin places” in Celtic spirituality, where the veil between heaven and earth seems gossamer sheer. Often a pilgrimage to a sacred place involves all three elements.

We are embodied, spiritual beings and pilgrimages touch us in our entirety; that is why they require some kind of physical journey. Some people have the desire and capacity to travel long distances on pilgrimage, but that is not necessary. More than a physical distance or direction, what is important is the direction of our heart. T. S. Eliot expresses it well in his poem “Little Gidding”:

*If you came this way,  
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,  
At any time or at any season,  
It would always be the same: you would have to put off  
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid.*

Next month we’ll look at the three stages of pilgrimage and the spiritual practices they may evoke.