THE PURPOSE OF A PILGRIMAGE

By the Rev. Bobbe Fitzhugh

A pilgrimage is a ritual journey with a hallowed purpose. Every step along the way has meaning. The pilgrim knows that life giving challenges will emerge. A pilgrimage is not a vacation; it is a transformational journey during which significant change takes place. New insights are given. Deeper understanding is attained. New and old places in the heart are visited. Blessings are received and healing takes place. On return from the pilgrimage, life is seen with different eyes. Nothing will ever be quite the same again.

Macrina Wiederkehr, Behold Your Life

One of the desires of the Diocese of Wyoming is to provide pilgrimage experiences for clergy and lay as budgetary constraints allow. Typically, the Diocese offers these life-changing journeys for Iona students, lay, clergy or youth in alternating years. In any given year, 30-35 pilgrims accompany Bishop Smylie or another group leader on these experiences into self-awareness. A portion of the trip is covered by the diocese/foundation, with the remainder being the responsibility of the individual pilgrims.

Plans are being made to provide a lay pilgrimage opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Paul in Greece in 2019. This follows a similar Iona-student itinerary in 2014. The Iona-student pilgrimage to Greece allowed students to develop a renewed appreciation and understanding of St. Paul, of the Orthodox Church and of the difficulties of spreading Christianity in that often unforgiving landscape. The passion and broad knowledge base of the guide helped tremendously and Eleni will once again lead this group in 2019.

A Holy Land Pilgrimage is invaluable in connecting the biblical dots when one is able to walk in the places talked about in the Bible. It also provides a balanced perspective on the people – Palestinian, Israeli, Jewish, Christian, Muslim – who share that sacred space. The 2017 Pilgrimage to the Holy Land for Iona Collaborative students was transformative as was the 2015 Lay Pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In fact, the Iona School asks that all candidates for Holy Orders embark on a pilgrimage during their ordination process.

In 2018, a Clergy pilgrimage to Ireland and Scotland took pilgrims to the roots of the Episcopal Church and to the land of thin places – those spaces where pilgrims have sensed the nearness of the Holy throughout the ages. Pilgrims came back with a deepened understanding of Celtic Spirituality, deepened relationships with each other and with God, and a deepened appreciation for creation.

Several years ago, a youth pilgrimage to England allowed pilgrims to immerse themselves in our Anglican roots and see some of the formational icons of modern-day Christianity.

The idea of a pilgrimage has an incredibly strong foundation in both the Old and New Testaments. The spiritual importance of pilgrimage is illustrated from Abraham’s journey of faith to the missionary journeys of St. Paul. The pivotal pilgrimage in Scripture is the Exodus – the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt – through the desert, trials, temptations and sin, every journeying toward the Promised Land. This episode has become
one of the primary models of the relationship between journeying and the life of conversion and faith.

A pilgrimage is a transformative journey to a sacred center. Hopefully this journey will uncover what the pilgrim longs for and help them discern and use their gifts and talents in a meaningful way. A pilgrimage fills one up with faith, with love and respect for fellow pilgrims and with a passion for sharing the Good News. Indeed, nothing will ever be the same when one returns from a pilgrimage.