



## **Post-Its from the Edge: Power of Pilgrimage**

*By Shannon Hopkins, a Texan in London living missionally*

*"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact*

*please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone." --*  
Thomas Merton

In the dark of night in 1997, in a red Toyota truck on yet another Texas highway (one of many I'd explored as a sales rep), I began a journey by crying out to God. Afterward, my mindset changed. I knew had to pursue God, to leave everything else behind. I started by going home.

Sometime in the morning, I made the call. To an old youth minister, someone very estranged from my life at that point. And I asked Mike to meet me. We met. I shared with him, where I had been, what I had invested my life in, and I knew I had come to a dead end or at least a cul-de-sac. I had to turn my life around. He said, "Well, you know what to do, and since you are here... I will see you in church on Sunday."

I jumped in my car and drove another hour to my parents' country house where my stuff, discarded from high school and university years, was in storage. I rummaged until I found my bible. I read. Though I found no answers, I sensed that I was back on the right road. Lots of things changed over the next year and my life looked less and less like my own. While I had had a nice home and lots of things, now all of my stuff could fit in my car, other than what was stored at my parents, of course, and house-sitting became the norm.

Was it 6 months or 9 before I became restless? Knowing that there had to still be more, I found the answers the church gave seem contrived -- more like the way to a good American life. And I had already been down that road. Through a mixture of tragedy and circumstance and open doors I began a ministry. I think this became the way to work out what God was showing me. I have said before that sometimes my ministry looks like a child playing with play-doh. I build something but look at it, evaluate it, and then want to squash it and move on.

So after one ministry led to another which then led to another, now here I am sitting in a café in London, having just visited five countries. Along the way, I collected stories and listened as God keeps teaching me about the journey, the giving up, the going out, the going forth.

Pilgrimage is defined as a long journey or search, especially one of exalted purpose or moral significance. And many people are going on pilgrimage today. Some of them set out to walk a specific path in search of God. Some people just get in their car and drive home, wherever home may be. Look around you and you will see many people on their own kind of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage can be a journey to a sacred place or to a shrine of importance related a person's beliefs and faith.

Currently, there is a growing revitalization of ancient pilgrimage trails such as the Camino to Santiago, which 300,000 people walked last year -- the majority of which would tell you that it is the journey not the destination that mattered. The Via Francigena was an important medieval pilgrimage road leading to Rome from Canterbury. It has been used by scores of people and still thousands walk it each month. In 2005 the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Italian Romano Prodi announced plans to revitalize the road.

And in France, young people from all over the world visit Taize each week to join in the community life. Taize has spawned a unique style of worship music that reflects the meditative nature of the community. The music emphasized simple phrases, usually from Psalms or other pieces of Scripture, repeated and sometimes also sung in canon. The repetition is intended to aid meditation and prayer. The Taize community has become an important destination for Christian pilgrimage with many thousand people visiting each year and groups -- up to six thousand in one week -- especially in summer. Taize attracts a large number of young adults (aged 17-30) which are the community's priority.

I found myself a few days ago at a round table of pioneers, people exploring new forms of church in Europe. The meeting was called and hosted by a foundation from the U.S. Merko & Josh were over for the meeting from Germany. We had been hearing about each other for years from fellow pilgrims, and it was nice to finally meet them.

I have to say I was a bit surprised to see them, as they were just days away from Freakstock. Freakstock is an annual festival put on by the Jesus Freaks, which Merko gave birth to about 10 years ago. For alternative Christians and pioneers across Europe, Freakstock is THE festival to go to, and it is a pilgrimage of sorts that people make, people coming yearly from all over the world.

Several years ago Kristen journeyed to Freakstock. Kristen had been doing summer missions among street kids in Amsterdam and had been hearing about the festival and she knew she had to make it. So no way would a few vehicle breakdowns stop her. It was a pivotal weekend for her! That festival changed her direction -- her ministry -- in so many ways. She found "her people" -- people that were passionate about Jesus but didn't look like the believers she knew in Texas. People that knew we had to do ministry in new ways, be prepared to be incarnational and walk alongside people for the long haul. She decided instead of seminary to do an apprenticeship in Dallas and get some on-the-ground-training whilst starting a new community.

While road trips, walking trails, and festivals reflect journey, there are other representational activities that pique the interest of pilgrims. The labyrinth is a physical meditation that represents the journey. Labyrinths come to us from medieval times, where they were often laid on the floors of cathedrals, used as a sort of miniature pilgrimage. Often, these "pilgrims" traveled the path on their knees

while praying continuously. Labyrinths today have seen a kind of revival- they are common today both in churches and Neopagan sanctuaries.

In walking the labyrinth you go through three stages. First, releasing (sometimes called purgation) - a letting go of the details of your life. This is the act of shedding thoughts and distractions, a time to open the heart and quiet the mind. Second, receiving or illumination - when you reach the center, you stay there as long as you like. This is a time to receive what is there for you to receive. And thirdly, returning - as you leave you follow the same path out of the center as the one you came in, you enter the third stage, which is joining God at work in the world empowered to find and do the work one feels your soul reaching for.

Part of the renewed interest in pilgrimage is in part coming with the renewed interest in Celtic spirituality. Features of the Celtic life included a focus on oral tradition and a love for story; a culture which was a nomadic, warrior, heroic, tribal, hierarchical and aristocratic society; greater equality for women; a sense of closeness and immanence between the natural and supernatural; a mandate for hospitality; and a high respect for artisans.

Many want today what the Celts shared. Thousands of people each year make the journey to the Isle of Iona, which is no small feat as it requires planes, boats and automobiles. Iona is a place, where people have lived, worked and worshipped over many centuries. To and from its shores have come monks and pilgrims, clan chiefs and kings, artists and craftsmen, farmers and fishermen. A mystical place, Iona is something many people want -- mystery and experience.

Pilgrimage is one of the major ways that postmoderns are seeking spiritual experience and journey is the major way their faith plays out. This is as true in North America as it is in the UK and it is spreading across the world as the Chinese church is looking at renewing the Silk Road back to Jerusalem. Pilgrimage requires preparation, sacrifice, time, discipline and it gives experience, adventure and engages all of one's senses. And after all, New Testament believers were not called Christians, they were called followers of The Way. We should not find it too hard to believe that people are seeking as they go *on the way*.

In the Emmaus story, Jesus comes on the scene and walks with the disciples. During the journey he helps them to make sense of all they have seen and experienced. What if evangelism today looks more like the Emmaus Road than the Road to Damascus? What if discipleship really is a walking alongside a fellow traveler? On the road to Damascus, Paul had an encounter -- one similar to Moses with the burning bush and Abraham as he put Isaac on the altar. There is an encounter, three days of waiting and preparation, and then Paul was off, convinced of the truth and with understanding of who Jesus was. With the rest of the disciples there was a call to journey with Jesus, for three years they were together, and still there was not clear understanding of who Jesus was or what had happened. So Jesus comes, joins two of them, "on the road," and as they walk along he explains all that they had seen. And still there was the part only God could do, as Jesus broke the bread, their eyes were opened. On the Emmaus road, there is patience and revelation, friendship and sharing.

What matters is the posture of a pilgrim along the path that is walked or the road that is driven. And this posture must continue as we go out into the world. "We go on mission as a pilgrim or sojourner. The guest, the outsider has to be open and

willing to learn things that you do not know, to listen to other people, to be the disciple." (Christian Mission Society)