



## Session THREE: Following Footsteps

### 1. Read

Read the chapters "Saints of Pilgrimage," "Thin Places," and "Dark Places, Dark Paths" (Pages 54 – 102) in *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life* by Jim Forest.

### 2. Chapter summary

In "Saints of Pilgrimage," Forest begins by noting that "Each saint's life is a drama of pilgrimage in which being in the Kingdom of God is a daily goal. Such pilgrimage need not involve travel." (Page 55) But he goes on to explain that "there are saints whose lives involved much travel and may be seen, in a double sense, as pilgrim saints." (Page 56) The chapter tells the ordinary and extraordinary stories of some of these pilgrim saints. For example, St. Teresa of Jesus was a Spanish nun in the 1500s who founded a reformed Carmelite community. Far from just being another convent, her new community of sisters embraced a life of poverty and simplicity that was focused on prayer. Those of us with many resources and privileges today may be challenged as we ponder how Teresa regarded her poverty as an asset rather than a handicap.

# Who is a Saint?

What's your picture or idea of a saint?

Someone with a halo, like in a 16th-century painting ... perhaps one of the apostles ... some spiritual hero who has attained sainthood because of their good works, like Mother Teresa ... possibly someone who had a big impact for good in your own life; a grandparent or teacher, a minister or Sunday School teacher?

"Saint" and "sanctified" are from the same root word, meaning to be set apart, to belong to God. All Christians are saints not because of what we have done for God ... but because of what Christ has done for us and continues to do through us!

When we become a Christian, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we become a saint – sanctified, belonging to God. The power of the Holy Spirit in us changes us and gives us grace to reach out to others with the good news and the love of Christ.

"Thin Places" invites us to consider some special places of pilgrimage "where ordinary matter seems charged with God's presence." (Page 70) "The most famous thin places are powerful magnets attracting pilgrims by the thousands or even millions." (Page 70) Many Christians receive inspiration and encouragement when they travel to a place widely known for a celebrated encounter with God, a place remembered for a key event in the life of Jesus, or a place linked with a great saint. There is a heightened awareness of being a part of the Communion of Saints and a sense that if God has been present here in such powerful ways in the past, perhaps I will meet God here as well.

In the next chapter, Forest says that "thin places are hidden in dark places" and that pilgrimages to places of injustice, violence, or despair can be important and transformative experiences. He explains that dark places "remind us, on the one hand, of the power of evil, but on the other hand, the human capacity to risk one's freedom and even one's life on behalf of the other, the stranger, the outsider, the endangered neighbor." (Page 100) A pilgrimage to a dark place such as the site of a former Residential School may be a difficult experience, but when we are willing to face the dark parts of our history, it is then that we can participate in the work of healing.

# *Thin Places and Dark Places*

Thin places are geographical locations where the veil between the world and a deeper spiritual reality seems to be pulled back. These are special places, known for their spiritual energy, where the people of faith are able to catch glimpses of God's presence and Kingdom more clearly. These places are not always joyful; these places can be found where horrible tragedies have taken place but where one can also experience God's work of reconciliation and redemption.

One such place for me is the recovered cemetery of the Regina Indian Industrial School on the edge of the city where I live. The school was operated by The Presbyterian Church in Canada from 1890-1910, and during that time, many students died from disease or accident, and some were buried in a simple cemetery near the school. Years of neglect following the permanent closure of the school led to the wooden grave markers rotting away and the cemetery being forgotten. It is heartbreaking to think about the children who were taken from their families, never to return home again. It is even more devastating to know that some families may never have known what happened to their children, and that there was no one to tend to their graves and honour them in death.

I have visited the cemetery many times since moving to this city and learning about the school that our church was responsible for operating. But one visit on Indigenous People's Day in 2021 stands out when I participated with other volunteers in cleaning up the cemetery. An Elder led us in a smudging ceremony before we stepped onto the grounds, and he invited us to do our work as an act of caring for the children whose spirits were still present in that space. We worked mostly in silence, gathering toys, ribbons, and tobacco offerings made by so many mourners over the previous year. These would be burned rather than thrown in the garbage—a respectful way to dispose of these gifts of love. The grass was cut, and the leaves were raked, and when we were finished, we sat down on the grass beside the cemetery and shared a traditional feast.

The Creator felt very close to us that day, and I thought about my own faith conviction that in life and in death, we belong to God. Although we don't know all the names of the children buried there, God knows each one by name and loves them unconditionally, as we failed to do. It was a privilege to participate in remembering and caring for the children in a small way, and an encouragement to stay on the difficult path of healing and reconciliation between the churches and Indigenous people in Canada.

### 3. Engage in a pilgrim practice

Engage in one or more pilgrimage practices. Each practice relates to one of the chapters above. Do each of them on a different day or choose one that appeals to you.

#### a. Saints of Pilgrimage

“Paul’s numerous pilgrimage journeys were not to places made sacred by past events in Jewish or Christian history but to places that became sacred because of what he achieved in bringing so many people to faith.” (Page 57)

Choose a destination for today’s pilgrimage where you can do, or say, or offer something that will bless the lives of others. If you are a preacher, walk or travel slowly to your church this Sunday morning. Visit someone who is sick or lonely. Travel somewhere you can volunteer your time, money, or effort to help someone else.

#### b. Thin Places

You likely won’t be able to accomplish a pilgrimage to one of the thin places that is described in the book this week, but perhaps you want to begin planning for one.

Have you heard of a special place closer to home, or is there a place where you felt the presence of God in a unique way once before? Could you return to the place where you were baptized or professed your faith for the first time? Could you return to a spot where you heard God calling you along a certain path? You wouldn’t be able to replicate that experience, but your pilgrimage could be one of gratitude for that sense of God’s nearness.

#### c. Dark Places, Dark Paths

Choose a dark place in your community. Travel there and spend some time learning, reflecting and praying. More than just knowing a history of suffering, pain or injustice, what does this place prompt you to do today?



## 4. Reflect on your experience

Reflect on your experience of pilgrimage and reading together with a group. If you don't join a group, you may want to write in a journal instead.

- a. Share with your group about your experience of pilgrimage this week. Where did you go? How was the journey? What was your experience of the pilgrimage practices?
- b. Share with your group about your experience of reading the chapters assigned for this week. Which ideas, stories, or quotes did you find helpful or inspiring? Were there any sections that you found puzzling, disagreeable or pause-worthy?

## 5. Further reflection

- a. The lives of the canonized saints may serve to inspire, encourage and be examples for us. Forest tells us about several pilgrim saints: St. Paul of Tarsus; St. Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine; St. Teresa of Jesus; St. Matrona Popova; St. Benedict Joseph Labré. Which of their stories did you find interesting or helpful and why?
- b. The chapter begins with a well-known quote: "The history of saints is mainly the history of insane people." (Page 54) As you read the stories of these pilgrim saints, did the quote resonate? What baffles or inspires you about their life choices on the way?
- c. Not all saints are canonized. Indeed, as St. Paul wrote, "We are all called to be saints." Forest adds that "saints are flawed people, like ourselves, whose lives, when shown warts and all, always bear the message, 'If I can do it, anyone can.'" (Page 68). Who are some of the non-canonized saints that you know? How have their lives inspired you?
- d. Forest tells us about three famous places that are great pilgrimage destinations: Mount Sinai, Jerusalem, and Iona. Have you visited any of them? Share your experiences with your group. Did you experience them as "thin places" with a time-stopping awareness of God's presence?
- e. Where else have you had the experience of a thin place? Another well-known location or somewhere special just to you or a small community?
- f. Did the chapter inspire you to visit one of these thin places or another one? Where would you like to go and why?

- g. Forest tells about a dark place in his community: the former synagogue of the Dutch city of Alkmaar. (Pages 86-88) Why do you think he considers it a pilgrimage to go there, and why does he bring visiting guests to see it?
- h. What are some of the dark places in our country or in your community? Have you visited? Do you bring your guests to these places? Why or why not?
- i. Forest suggests that “Thin places are hidden in dark places,” and Archbishop Anastasios said, “The resurrection is not after the cross but in the cross.” In what ways have you experienced this to be true in your own life? Consider experiences of illness, grief, suffering, or failure.

## 6. Scripture connection

Read Hebrews 11:13-16.

These verses follow after the author of Hebrews’ definition of faith and examples of people of faith in Scripture. The journey of faith is imagined as a pilgrimage through life with a destination that is beyond this world. Forest comments: “Thus we are a pilgrim people, always on our way but, while we live in this damaged world, never arriving.” (Page 57)

- a. Think of your life as a pilgrimage, whether you travel a lot or not. Towards what are you travelling? How are you getting there?
- b. What are you doing along the way? Which is more important – the destination or the steps along the way?
- c. Does having a destination make a difference to your journey? Consider the physical journeys you have experienced as well as your spiritual journey through life.



## 7. Prayer

God of the Journey,  
Christ, who is our Way.  
Spirit who inspires,  
you are our destination.  
We thank you for the saints before us and beside us  
who follow in your footsteps and encourage us in our steps.  
We praise you for the thin places  
where ordinary matter seems charged with your presence.  
We remember that even on dark paths  
you do not leave us or forsake us.  
By your grace, we will follow you all the way. Amen.

## 8. Song suggestions

"Walk Together, Children" song by Brookline High School Music:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90AjaE7M7BU>

