



Session FOUR: Along the Way

1. Read

Read the chapters "Right Where I'm Standing," "Leaving Fear Behind," and "Interruptions and Surprises" (Pages 103 - 146) in *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life* by Jim Forest.

2. Chapter summary

Although many pilgrims choose to travel to famous sites, Forest believes that Christ is present with us "Right Where I'm Standing," and we are invited to attend to that presence in us when we are truly ourselves, at the centre of our being. Although we cannot manufacture personal encounters with God, we can choose to pay attention to God's presence in our everyday lives. For example, we could do the homework assignment that Forest gave to his students: Write a paper describing a moment of joy in your life – any experience. It isn't necessary that it have an overtly religious context or obvious religious meaning. While you may not have noticed God's presence at the time, often in the reflecting, we can begin to discern how God meets us in the most unlikely places, at unexpected moments, and without a neon sign flashing the word God.

In "Leaving Fear Behind," Forest writes about pilgrimages of healing that do not involve a physical journey. These pilgrimages take us from fear to greater love, deeper faith, more intimate communion, community, peace within ourselves, and the Reign of God. In particular, Christ releases us from the fear of death, freeing us to live according to his Way. Such a pilgrimage may begin with acknowledging and naming our fears and then choosing to trust God and take a leap of faith.

While some pilgrimages are well-planned with schedules, provisions and direct routes, Forest invites us to consider how God is at work in the Interruptions and Surprises along the way. Often, we can be so focused on our plans and agendas that we do not allow ourselves to be interrupted. For example, we are looking only at the map, and we miss the view along the way. Or we are checking off the tasks on our list, so we miss the important conversation we could have had with someone who stopped by.

Interruption and Surprises

It was a cold February afternoon in Regina (about minus 20C) when I headed out from my church office to do one of the pilgrimage practices for Session One of this study. My intent was to walk through a neighbourhood that experiences challenges related to poverty and exclusion in my city, just East of downtown, where my church is located. I was planning to walk slowly, looking for beauty, and I was hoping that I wouldn't freeze!

I was only a few blocks into my walk when I saw and heard a woman coming towards me on the sidewalk. She was hunched over, moving slowly and weeping. From a bit of a distance, I asked, "Are you okay?" She struggled to lift her head up to see who was talking to her but then clearly replied, "No, not really." I soon learned that she was trying to walk to a women's shelter a few blocks away, so I offered to help her get there.

I placed my shoulder under hers and supported her weight as we slowly walked along the icy sidewalk, and as we made the journey together, she poured out her heart to me. She was hungry and houseless, and she hadn't slept for several days. She told me about her children, about her attempts to get her life and family in order, about her regret and shame and despair. At one point, we just stopped in our tracks, and I held her while she wept. When she was ready, we continued our journey and soon made it to the shelter, where she was welcomed.

Then I made my way back to the church, weeping a little myself as I walked. Although my plan had been interrupted, I knew without a doubt that God had just given me the pilgrimage I was supposed to go on that afternoon. I wondered how often I miss opportunities like that because my schedule is full, my plans are fixed, or I'm looking down.

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. Right Where I'm Standing

Nancy relates the experience of going to Mount Tabor, the site of Jesus' Transfiguration. She stood on the spot, marked with an "X", and experienced her earlier vision again: The whole earth fell away from her on all sides, and she became aware of God's presence in her when she is truly herself, at the centre of her being.

Choose a place to travel to today. Choose somewhere where you can be still and let the world fall away from you in all directions. If your destination has some sand or dirt, you may even want to use a stick to mark an "X" on the spot where you stand.

b. Leaving Fear Behind

Is there a place that causes you some anxiety or fear? Don't go to a place that is actually unsafe or that causes you distress but consider a pilgrimage to somewhere that pushes the boundaries of your comfort zone. Perhaps it is a challenging hike that you are not sure you can handle. Perhaps it is in a neighbourhood with a reputation that would keep you away. Perhaps your destination is to visit someone or do something important but anxiety-producing. Perhaps the journey will not be to an actual place, but rather a thought or a memory that you have been avoiding. Travel to that place and face down that fear, knowing that you do not walk alone.

c. Interruptions and Surprises

Travel without a watch. If you normally count your steps or your distance, leave all your devices at home. Don't plan to be back at a certain time or to keep an appointment. Just be a pilgrim and see what happens. If you encounter an interruption, consider it a surprise. Allow yourself to change course, slow down, or stop for a time.



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. Sometimes, Christians are inclined to seek God mostly in "holy" places – in churches, retreat centres, or well-known places of pilgrimage. Where have you experienced God's presence when you didn't expect it?
- b. French novelist and poet, Leon Bloy wrote: "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God." (Page 105) Forest suggests that we consider when we have felt such joy: "Describe a moment of joy in your life – any experience. It isn't necessary that it have an overtly religious context or obvious religious meaning. God often meets us in the most unlikely places, at unexpected moments, and without a neon sign flashing the word God ... What did God reveal to you at that moment about who God is, and who you are?" (Page 106)
- c. What is the difference between happiness and joy? Forest's answer is on pages 106-107. What do you think?
- d. For Nancy, becoming aware of her greatest fear allowed her to make some different choices that changed the course of her life. What is your greatest fear? Does naming it help you to overcome it, or not allow it to have power over you?
- e. After 9/11, Robert J. Ursane, Chairman of the Psychiatry Department at the University School of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland, said this: "People are feeling a bit more vigilant, a little less safe and a little more vulnerable." (Page 119)

How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the anxiety and fear levels of people? In what ways was that fear appropriate or even helpful? At what point does the fear become unhelpful or even debilitating?

- f. Forest tells a story about Louise Degrafinried and her husband Nathan, who were held hostage by an escaped convict. Years later, the convict, Riley, spoke at her funeral. He said, “Mrs. Degrafinried was real Christianity. No fear.”

What do you think he meant by that? How does your faith conquer your fear? How do you think Mrs. Degrafinried experienced that moment? Would she say she had no fear? Might she say that her faith enabled her to accept the situation she found herself in and to respond faithfully in the midst of fear?

- g. Consider the icon of Christ descending into hell to conquer death. How would you describe the freedom from fear of death that Christ gives us? How does this freedom change the way that you live?
- h. Forest says that a pilgrimage, by definition, is an extended interruption to ordinary life. How have your pilgrimages over the last few weeks interrupted your usual activities or schedule?
- i. Compare the words “interruption” and “surprise.” Share some examples of times you have experienced each of these. How do you normally respond when your plans don’t go as planned?

6. Scripture connection

Read Luke 1:26-38.

Forest describes the annunciation as “the great interruption of all time.” (Page 136)

- a. Discuss how Mary responded to this interruption and the difference it made in her life and for the world.
- b. Have you experienced an interruption that changed the direction of your life? Have you experienced an interruption that became a blessing?



7. Prayer

God of the Journey,
Christ, who is our Way.
Holy Spirit of God,
we remember that you are with us, in us, around us, and between us
in the places where we are standing today.
Even as we worry about the present and wonder about the future,
we trust that you will walk us away from fear and into faith.
Some of us love to make plans and grab control of our lives.
We need your help and strength when interruptions seem to impede our progress.
Open our eyes to recognize the blessings in the surprises
and the detours as holy steps on the Way. Amen.

8. Song suggestions

"Journeying Prayer" by Paul Melley: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEQ7jOL43Y0>



Icon of Christ Harrowing Hell: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chora_Anastasis1.jpg