

February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager  
Texts: Isaiah 40: 28-31; Mark 9: 2-11

### **Up and Down the Mountain: On Praying with Our Feet**

Mildred Norman changed her name to "Peace Pilgrim". The year was 1953, and as an ordinary person looked at the world around her and felt driven to do something... McCarthyism was ramping up, the Cold War had begun, segregation was rampant under Jim Crow. After walking the Appalachian Trail with a friend (and becoming the first woman on record to do so), "Peace" sold her possessions and took her first dedicated steps into the world. She was 45 years old.

For nearly 30 years, Peace crisscrossed the US and Canada, 7 times on foot, raising awareness for peace and nonviolence before she passed away in a car accident in 1981. In the spirit of St Francis of Assisi, she relied on the kindness of strangers. Speaking to organizations around the country, she carried only what she needed in her pockets. Toothpaste, fresh socks, paper and pen. Peace made friends wherever she went, spoke of nonviolence to organizations peace with whoever would listen.

*"Just call me Peace Pilgrim," she said. "In undertaking this pilgrimage I do not think of myself as an individual, but rather as an embodiment of the heart of the world, which is pleading for peace."*

*"The world situation is grave," she continued. "Humanity, with fearful, faltering steps, walks a knife edge between abysmal chaos and a new renaissance, while strong forces push toward chaos. Yet there is hope in these steps..."<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words (1992).

I'll be honest when I first heard of Peace, I thought she sounded overly idealistic, but the more I read her book and learned of her dedication to peacemaking and hope ...that her steps and voice might add to the transforming of this violent world into a peaceful one, I realized she was another countercultural prophet of the road worth listening to.

"Listen" said a voice from the cloud. As the gospel of Mark reads, Jesus took Peter, James and John for a walk up high one day. Up the mountain they went-often Jesus went himself away somewhere to grab a moment or two of peace and take in the wide sky.

A mountaintop, like an empty beach at low tide, is as good a place as any to find a moment of peace and let the universe speak for a change. Up high, there's no malice or hard news. Revelations flow easily in the silence. A place away like a mountaintop welcomes us to see and hear something new beyond ourselves and our myopic point of view; whether an eagle in flight or a vision of the great cloud of witnesses in whose footsteps we walk today.

The disciples on that mountain morning were surely overwhelmed, summoned by the holy to lean in, to "LISTEN" to Jesus...There really wasn't time to linger in the vision -as Peter hoped to do.

In the dazzling brightness some truths were illuminated. reminders that we stand on worthy shoulders. On Sacred ground.

The writer of Mark's gospel wants us to remember that Jesus comes from a long legacy of prophetic witnesses-and that Jesus, James, John and Peter, and you and me are the beloved of God, too.

That there's much to listen to that is food for the journey and energy for the road ahead.

Can you remember a time when you sensed the shimmering presence of something that changed you? What was revealed in your life? Perhaps you've never told

anybody about it -- this mountaintop experience, maybe it was a quiet thing. maybe it came when you could barely manage to put one foot in front of the other, let alone make a big climb.

While Peace Pilgrim was walking her way across the country on her own, Rabbi Abraham Heschel in 1965 joined the Civil Rights Marchers, one of the few rabbis and white faith leaders who joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King. Shoulder to shoulder, they led countless other peaceful protestors in Alabama, walking across the bridge at Selma. As you know, twenty of us from FCCOL youth and adults are heading to Selma to walk that bridge and meet with folks who walked bravely forward for freedom on that Bloody Sunday in March of 1965.

Rabbi Heschel returned to his home in NY after the protests and was asked, "did you pray while you were there?" He responded, "*I prayed with my feet.*" Heschel's steps, his marching, persistence, protesting, and advocating for Civil Rights was his greatest prayer of all.

As Heschel knew, prayer, embodied prayer using our feet, yes, our hands, our voices - has the power to move us beyond ourselves into the world around us. He may have already known the words of Frederick Douglass who said one day, "*I prayed for freedom for twenty years, but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.*"

That prayer comes in many forms. Whether one is sitting, standing or walking. Italian mystic, Catherine of Siena, wrote that "prayer is achieved not with many words but with loving desire...everything you do can be a prayer."

Next week, a few of us are preparing to pray with our feet by joining the upcoming *Pilgrimage for Peace*, starting on Ash Wednesday, Valentine's Day, Feb 14th through February 21, 2024. Walkers are invited to join the pilgrimage for the whole week or for a day with faith leaders, activists, and artists journeying on foot

from Independence Hall in Philadelphia, PA to the White House in Washington, DC. The purpose of this nonviolent action is to urge President Biden to call for an end to the war in Palestine and release of all hostages, prisoners and more humanitarian aid instead of weapons.

Moved by our collective conscience, we will walk and pray for an end to the war in Gaza where the death toll has reached over 27,000, higher than any other major 21st Century conflict.

Steve, Carleen and I will at various times join the march, symbolically passing "the baton." I will be leaving next Friday with a small group and plan to join the marchers for Friday and Saturday. As it says on the website of this march, we believe "it is our collective responsibility to advocate for a peaceful resolution and uphold the principles of justice and compassion. We will either sow seeds of nonviolence today or reap nonexistence tomorrow."<sup>2</sup>

This nonviolent action is co-sponsored by a multi-faith collection of organizations from Black Clergy to Rabbis for a Ceasefire, Hindus for a Ceasefire to the World Council of Churches and Pax Christi among many others.

As I'm preparing myself for the journey, I remember being in the Chapel at Yale Divinity School when the Rev Dr. Calvin Butts III, the famous African American pastor from the Abyssinian Baptist Church NYC gave the sermon. It was a mountaintop moment. Rev. Butts had us loosen up our feet, got us marching right there in our seats, like this:

Feet on the ground lifting our knees, stepping up and down to the ground  
I invite you now to do the same, to march with your feet, too,

March in place

Keep it going now Marching like this  
My body moving and yours, moving as one big holy prayer of steps

marching and moving in an ongoing drumbeat of feet holding the legacy of those whose footsteps we walk in today.

Up the mountain and down, and onto the streets  
Praying with our feet in whatever way we can They may be sore, they may have carried alot lately, but

Keep it going, Keep it going anyway  
Remembering those for whom we march...

Whether you are going to walk with us on the route to Washington DC next week to demand a ceasefire

Keep it going, Keep marching  
or whether you're willing to light a candle and say a prayer at home in solidarity for those of us on the road  
and for those living amidst such relentless violence.

Keep marching and praying and knowing that  
each step you take is a blessing as we accompany one another  
And help to transfigure this world from suffering to love,

From one of violence, to one of kinship and community.  
Let us keep our bodies moving forward in this work of justice

Remembering that we walk in belovedness and love ...  
following the greats, known and unknown, like Peace Pilgrim, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and Rabbi Heschel...

That we are co-creators together of a new world where change is gonna come.

May the blessings of many footsteps ..be with you all.

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(\*\*Ms. Nekita Waller at the end of my sermon will sing Sam Cooke's, *A Change is Gonna Come*)



As you embark on your Lenten journey, I wonder where God might be inviting you to experience awe and your own transfiguration as you make your way into the wilderness and toward the cross, the tomb and great beyond. Wherever it may be, I pray that it is a journey that brings you closer to the Holy and leaves you transfigured again and again.

We *are* called to act when we see injustice and to be in persistent prayer. I invite you to join with me in finding something you are passionate about and pray for it. Pray with your feet, your hands, your voice, and your whole body. Pray with persistence. Pray to make this world a better place.

**History of Marches and Mass actions**  
<http://www.stephenagreen.com/about>

When I am at my most rattled or in victimized self-righteousness, I go for walks, another way to put my feet to prayer. I pray for help, and in some dimension outside of my mind or language, I relax. I can breathe again. I say, “Thank you.” I say, “Thank you for the same flowers and trees and ferns and cactuses I pass every day.” I say, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

A walk is a great prayer. To make eye contact and smile is a kind of prayer, and it changes you. Fields and woods are the kingdom. You don’t say, “Oh, there’s a dark-eyed junco flitting around that same old pine tree; whatever,” or: “Look at those purple wildflowers. I’ve seen those a dozen times.” You are silent. There may be no one around you and the forest will speak to you in the way it will speak to an animal. And that changes you. At bedtime I pray again for my sick friends, and the refugees. I beg for sleep. I give thanks for the blessings of the day. I rest into the vision of the pearly moon outside my window that looks like a porthole to a bigger reality, sigh and close my tired eyes.

I have the theological understanding of a bright 8-year-old, but Jesus says we need to approach life like children, not like cranky know-it-alls, crazily busy, clutching our to-do lists. One of my daily prayers is, “Slow me down, Girlfriend.” The prayer changes me. It breaks the toxic trance. God says to Moses the first time they meet, “Take off your shoes.” Be on the earth. Breathe with me a moment.

Our writer of Isaiah was of course speaking to a people in exile, who'd spent a lot of years away from home. They were tired. Tired of the distance, the longing, the not knowing if they'll ever get back, of feeling powerless. He speaks to us, too. We get tired. Exhausted, even. Lonely. Faint, the poet says. And what is the word we're to hear?