

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 20, 2025

As you probably know, pilgrimages have been an essential part of the religious lives of people for a very long time. From ancient times up to the present day some men and women have chosen to travel to special “holy” sites, some relatively close by, and some quite far away. And this is especially true in the life of the Christian Church, particularly Catholicism. Whether it be Jerusalem or Rome, Fatima or Lourdes, Mexico City or Santiago, men and women have been spending both time and treasure seeking out these unique places.

Yet, while on the surface it might seem that these holy pilgrimages are all about the “destination”, all about the final goal, true pilgrims know this is not really true, not really an accurate reflection of the true purpose of such an endeavor.

Rather, the true purpose is the journey itself, the path and the transformation that often takes place in the process. And if you have ever talked to someone who has made such a journey (or have made one yourself) you will often hear them talk rather little about the trip’s endpoint.

Instead, the person will often tell story after story about the journey itself, story after story about the towns along the way, or the places they stayed at, or most importantly, the people they met along the way.

In other words, the God they hoped to encounter, the God they hoped to grow closer to, was not found at the end of the pilgrimage, but rather was encountered countless times along the way. The divine was not limited to a few select places, but was all around them, and the pilgrimage itself helped create a spiritual space in which they could see the God in their midst, encounter the God in their midst, commune with the God in their midst.

We just heard two Scripture stories (one well-known, one somewhat less so) in which the people in the story have just such a divine encounter. In

our First Reading from Genesis we find Abraham and Sarah having probably an ordinary day when Abraham suddenly sees three strangers standing nearby. And instead of waiting for them to approach him or ask him for something, he rushes out to them and goes above and beyond what would have been expected even beyond his duty to show basic hospitality.

Why was he so excited to see them? Why did he act in such an extravagant way? We don't really know. But it seems pretty clear that he was open to something, open to someone, open to a true spirit of care and concern and generosity. He later finds out, as we did at the start of the passage, that these were no ordinary men. Rather, this was a visit from God accompanied by angels. And the "reward" for his actions is that they tell him that Sarah will conceive in her old age.

And in the Gospel passage from Luke we hear the famous story of Martha and Mary, a story in which two sisters welcome Jesus into their home. One sister, Martha, presumes that the best thing to do is to show him hospitality similar to what Abraham and Sarah did in our First Reading.

The other sister, Mary, does something much different. She sits at his feet excited to listen to his every word. And while both sisters are doing something "good" for Jesus, it is Mary's behavior that gets affirmed. In a certain sense, Mary was aware that something holy was about to happen, something or someone divine was in their midst, while Martha was simply doing what she probably would have done for any visitor.

These stories, my dear friends, can be a little difficult to understand in that we aren't immersed in the same culture as the characters in the story were, we don't live in a world with the same societal demands and expectations. And we can get bogged down in all the details of the stories, trying to figure out how Abraham's behavior and Martha's behavior seem to be the same, and yet are treated differently in each story.

But what strikes me is the “ordinariness” of each situation. These types of situations happened all the time, were commonplace. Yet, for Abraham and Mary something told them that these situations only appeared to be “normal” and that something “extraordinary” might be taking place. It was as if they were “seeing” differently from most people, seeing in such a way that they were open to a moment of grace, open to an encounter with the divine, open to being visited by their God.

My dear friends, if only we could do the same. Sometimes we approach life as if it is a kind of journey in which the only thing that matters is the final destination. “Am I doing the right things and living the right way so that I will arrive at the place I want someday,” we often think to ourselves maybe not in those exact words, of course. And if the God we hope to meet is just found in heaven, then our lives become a long stretch without much to look forward to, an endless string of days filled with often difficult, burdensome situations and circumstances.

But maybe it’s not that kind of trip at all. Maybe it’s more like a pilgrimage, a holy journey pointed in the direction of heaven, yet filled with encounter after encounter after encounter with the living God. And these kinds of encounters will be found not just in out-of-this-world moments, but most often in the common, ordinary moments.

I believe that it takes real faith to see every moment and every encounter as an opportunity of grace, a chance for us to touch the divine, a chance for us to experience our God in the places and people we least expect.

This is not always an easy thing, for potential holy moments don’t always appear so. It takes an open heart, an expectant heart, a hopeful heart, hearts like Abraham and Mary, and I’m sure Martha too!. So let’s set our sights on heaven, but be ready to encounter God long before that.

A Short Story

There is a well-known fable about Jesus visiting his friends. Once Jesus promised a pious elderly lady that he would visit her that day. She got

ready, cleaned the house, scrubbed everything to shining, kept things in order, and sat waiting for the Lord to come to her house.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. She rushed to open the door and saw only a poor shabbily dressed beggar. She was disappointed and told the beggar that she was not free and was waiting for an important guest. He must quickly go away. The beggar was confused and sad.

A bit later there was another knock to find a familiar elderly man for help. She was not free to take care of him and she sent him away by slamming the door. After some time there was another knock and she ran to the door to find a hungry beggar asking for bread. She was annoyed and sent him away empty-handed.

She sat down and waited for Jesus and there was no sign of him. She went to bed with a heavy heart. The good Lord came to her in the dream and she complained. He said that he did come three times and for three times she denied him entry.