

**Christianity in A New Age
Series 1: Pilgrim's Progress
Countryside Community Church**

**Part 1: How does Scripture guide us on our journey?
by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes
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Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Matthew 13:44; Matthew 11:28-30

Note: Before reading this sermon, it is recommended that you take a few moments to identify a question for which you could use guidance from a "higher power." The question should be personal, preferably involving a situation you are facing this coming week.

1. God-Breathed

In this time of great anxiety and turmoil, many are led to despair. Some even believe that the end of the world is upon us. Others of us believe that it is not the end of the world, but rather the end of the world as we know it. A new era of human history is being brought forth that some call the Age of Spirit. I'm one of those believers. I believe that the Spirit of our Creator is lodged in the very marrow of our bones, pressing for release in order to permeate every fiber of our being; that we are invited by this same Spirit to become spiritual pilgrims assisting humanity across the seas of chaos to find safe harbor within a deeper manifestation of God's Realm. If this is true, then I desire to be one of these pilgrims. And if not, then I hope at the very least to be found faithful to the God who inspires in me the desire to make the pilgrim's journey.

How about you?

Many of you are aware that our direct predecessors in the United Church of Christ are the pilgrims who made their way from England to Holland and then to the United States. When those original pilgrims set sail from Holland, their pastor, John Robinson, already sensed the historic nature of their voyage. He intuited that these souls were not simply making a physical voyage but a spiritual pilgrimage to a new land – one that might bring the Christian faith itself into new awareness of God and, with it, a fuller manifestation of God's Realm on earth. Pastor Robinson knew these pilgrims were far from perfect, nor was he. Thus,

Robinson gave them the following charge as he himself remained behind in Holland:

"I charge you before God...that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If God reveals anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth by my ministry ..."

Then, Robinson offered a piece of guidance that perhaps speaks as profoundly in our day as it did in his own:

*"... for I am verily persuaded **the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word.** For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of those reformed churches which...will go, at present, no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; whatever part of His will our God had revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented..."*

Once the pilgrims arrived on American soil, they created the earliest experiment in democracy, reforming the Church first, then society. To this day, we stand in the pilgrim tradition as a self-governing church body, where our members determine our destiny in conversation with the Holy Spirit rather than relying on others "higher up" to make decisions for us.

Of course, the pilgrims were not perfect. They eventually proved themselves to act just as lamentably as other Christians whom Pastor Robinson had originally called out in his address. We acted particularly poorly toward the native peoples who had so graciously welcomed and supported the pilgrims when they were in great need.

As much as these courageous pilgrims are to be revered, therefore, we must also recognize that their progeny would eventually look back and recognize that God's revelation and mission was not perfectly realized nor completed with the pilgrims but was continuing in their day. This was particularly true when it came to manifesting Jesus's vision "that they may all be one" – which is the United Church of Christ motto. (John 17:21). Those who followed in the pilgrim's footsteps acted on the assumption that we cannot "all be one" until all people are treated as equals, equally created in God's very image and likeness.

Thus, the direct ancestors to the United Church of Christ were first to speak out against slavery (as early as 1708), the first to move toward slavery's abolishment, the first Protestant denomination to ordain an African American pastor (Lemuel Haynes), the first to establish schools (over 600!) to educate the children of freed slaves after the Civil War. Our ancestors also founded some of the greatest academic institutions in America, including Harvard, Yale, and Dartmouth. While many of these institutions were founded exclusively to train clergy, our ancestors would later move to diversify these institutions to serve both clergy and laity, and later to serve both Christians and non-Christians.

This pilgrim tradition was also the first to ordain a woman (Antoinette Brown, 1851), was among the founders of the Social Gospel movement against economic oppression (1897), was extremely active in the racial justice movement of the 1950s and 60s, was the first to ordain an openly gay minister (1972), and was the first Christian denomination to affirm same-gender marriage (1995).

All of these developments came about not because our ancestors wanted to be "socially relevant" or "politically correct". They did it because they believed, like Pastor Robinson, that "The Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of [God's] Holy Word." In other words, they read the Scriptures – fervently – and they prayed just as fervently. Then they acted on what they heard.

All this raises a question that is central to our time. In the Age of Spirit, how does one continue to be guided by Scriptures that are 2 to 3,000 years old?

II. God Spot

After the Ireland Retreat concluded last month, one of the places I visited in the south of Ireland was Glendalough. Glendalough was established in the 6th Century by a Celtic saint named Kevin who was born into a wealthy family and left it all behind in order to live a life of prayer and solitude in the valley of Glendalough. Kevin is the saint I spoke about before leaving for Ireland who, legend says, prayed so long that a blackbird laid an egg in his hand and hatched it. While the story is pure legend, it speaks to something we actually know about Kevin: he was deeply committed to prayer and solitude. As more people sensed a certain holiness in Kevin, they themselves moved to Glendalough to be near him and learn from him. But Kevin, never wishing to be a spiritual leader, kept moving further and further up the valley, past two lakes, until settling into a cave high above the second lake.

It didn't help. The more Kevin sought solitude, the more people sought him out. Eventually, Kevin relented and established a monastery at the base of the valley, below its two lakes.

Being a long-time student of prayer and meditation, and being a fan of Celtic Christian spirituality and Kevin, I expected that my visit to Glendalough would be a highpoint of my journey. It exceeded all expectations.

Immediately upon arrival, I sensed that something was quite different about Glendalough. The whole valley seems to radiate a spirit of graciousness and generosity. It is an incredibly happy and peaceful place. When you are there, it's hard not to feel happy and peaceful yourself – even with a thousand tourists wandering all over the place. I'm not sure I've ever experienced a place quite like it. Enthralled by my experience, I determined to rise early the next morning before the crowds arrived and hike to the second lake to find Kevin's cave.

Parking my car at the visitor's center just as the sun was rising, I strapped on my knapsack and hit the trail. That feeling of buoyancy and peace washed over me once again, only more powerfully. As I walked beside the lower lake, I took a short break on its shore to take in the scenery. The lake was perfectly still. Across the lake, sheep were arising in the hillside meadows and beginning to call out to their kindred. Just as I turned to rejoin the trail feeling somewhat hurried so as to stay ahead of the crowds, something within me said, "Wait! Don't go anywhere until you are as calm and peaceful as this lake is."

I set aside my impatience and stood there until everything settled to stillness within. Then I turned, rejoined the trail, and as soon as I did so I noticed a small opening in the hillside about a hundred feet above me. It looked like it might be a cave. It wasn't marked by any sign and there was no groomed trail leading up to it, so I wasn't sure.

"Should I climb up there?" I asked myself. "Of course," I said. Perhaps there is a reason why I felt the urge not to move on too quickly."

Climbing the hill, I found that it was indeed a cave! A small one, overlooking the lake. The cave was just big enough to admit one or two people, and just flat and dry enough to sit down and pray in. Sitting myself down, I realized that, given the centuries of monks and other spiritual pilgrims who had inhabited Glendalough, the cave had undoubtedly been used as a place of prayer and

meditation. Kevin himself probably had spent a lot of time here in this cave before moving further up the valley, and again after moving back down the valley to establish his monastery.

I decided that my hiking for the day might just be over. I was going to pray in this same spot for as long as the Spirit moved me. She moved me for about ninety minutes. As I prayed, the voices of the sheep bleating across the valley were creating micro-echoes inside the cave, creating an atmosphere that seemed to invite the Spirit's presence. And while there, I had a couple of insights about my own spiritual pilgrimage that I consider to be of lasting value.

Looking back on my experience in the valley of Glendalough, I wonder what made the whole experience so mystical, and why the whole place seemed to exude a spirit of generosity and welcome. Was it because the valley itself naturally held a certain energy within it – perhaps an energy that originally attracted St. Kevin there in the first place? Or was it because that valley contained the residue of hundreds of thousands of spiritual pilgrims who had spent time there over the centuries? Or, did I experience Glendalough in this way simply because I revered the place before I ever came, making me particularly open to spiritual experience?

I think the answer to each of these questions very well might be, "Yes."

I think Scripture acts the same way. Scripture is holy not simply because of the words it contains. And Scripture is not holy simply because the writings have been considered holy by Christians for nearly 20 centuries. Neither is Scripture holy just because you or I consider the writings holy before we even open our Bibles. Rather, all three of these dynamics create a meeting-ground between the Holy and us. And this is why the Scriptures still "hath more truth yet to break forth" for pilgrims in our day.

What truth will "break forth" from the Scriptures to speak directly to *you*?

III. God Experience

One way of meeting up with the Holy Spirit on the sacred ground of Scripture is to engage with it in a way that has been used for centuries and has been experiencing a strong resurgence in our day. This technique is known as *Lectio Divina*. Below, you will find a version of *Lectio Divina* that I am currently using on Wednesday evenings during the Meditation section of the Converging Paths

gathering. I call it *Pneuma Divina*. (*Pneuma* means "Spirit".) To try it yourself, I suggest the following process, which should take 20-30 minutes (longer if you like!):

Step One: Read the following passage (or another passage of your choice) at least twice, slowly. Then underline whatever word or phrase seems to stand out. Try not to "overthink" this. You don't need to know why it stands out. Just go with your gut.

Matthew 11:28-30

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Step Two: Set the passage aside, get comfortable, and pray for someone who is currently driving you crazy. Jesus said not to enter the sanctuary if you are in dispute with someone. Rather, you should go settle the dispute and then enter. By praying for this "someone", we enter prayer in the spirit Jesus asked us to.

Step Three: Now, pray for someone you love who is hurting right now, in body or soul. As you do so, try to surrender both yourself and this person to the loving and healing energy of God.

Step Four: Give thanks for anything you are grateful for that has come to you in the last 24 hours – particularly any love you have received or given away. (This step is like the Examen we use on Sunday mornings.)

Step Five: Call to mind the question you asked at the beginning of this sermon. Try to surrender yourself more fully to the Spirit and slowly turn the question in your mind.

Step Six: After several minutes, recall the word or phrase that raised itself up when you read the Scripture. Ask what conversation this word or phrase may have with the question you brought before the Spirit.

Step Seven: Whenever you are ready, simply give thanks to God and close your prayer. It is important to recognize that, while sometimes a word of insight comes to us during this time of meditation, you very well may experience no insight at

all. This is perfectly natural. The key is to keep pondering your question, and the Scripture you highlighted beyond your formal meditation. The purpose of meditation is not necessarily to receive insight at that time, but to open yourself to the Spirit who will stay in conversation with you until you perceive an answer, provided you're willing to listen.

May your spiritual pilgrimage be rich and deep, and the Spirit's voice be generous and gracious.