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“By the end of the journey in reading this book, my soul was awakened with fresh Easter hope. *Journey to Jerusalem* is a rich resource for personal prayer. I know preachers, teachers, spiritual directors and retreatants will also savor these reflections.”

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“Villano has creatively crafted an enriching and nourishing companion. *Journey to Jerusalem* is both practical and inspiring. It is an invaluable resource for individual readers, ministry leaders, parish groups, teachers, catechists, young adults, clergy and more.”

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“The Bible is steeped in meaning drawn from reflection on people, landscapes, events, and the full range of human experiences. In this everyday span of life, God’s presence is detected. That is the convincing rationale for Fr. Mark Villano’s attractive book of spiritual reflections that take their inspiration from the deep wellspring of biblical imagery. Accessible and inspiring, here is rich spiritual reading open to all.”

— Donald Senior, CP  
President Emeritus of Catholic Theological Union

# Journey to Jerusalem

Steps on the Road to Your Soul

*Mark A. Villano*



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## *Introduction*

*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*

—Luke 9:51

A journey has a destination, a goal. At one point in the gospel, Jesus sets out resolutely on the road toward Jerusalem, preparing to do what he must to fulfill God's work of redemption. There will be healing and teaching along the way, but ultimately it will lead to the cross—and through the cross.

In fact, Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover feast, recalling God's mighty deeds at the time of the exodus. The feast commemorated how God delivered his people from the bondage of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. It was at this time of year that Jesus was crucified. It was at this time that his followers experienced a new kind of deliverance, a new "passing over" from death to life, a mighty act of God that changed their lives forever.

This journey to Jerusalem is a road to our own souls. It calls us to examine our lives, to look within, to appreciate the personal invitations and insights that God gives to each of us. It calls us to value our travelling companions and to serve our neighbors. It also demands that we not avert our eyes from the ways we need to change. It asks us to turn from what is destructive in our lives and welcome the gospel message of hope.

Travelling this road is, therefore, not easy work. And yet, it is a celebration. It is meant to be healing for our wounds and renewal for our minds. It is infused with God's compassion and guidance. It brings wisdom and growth.

As disciples, we are invited to accompany Jesus on this journey. What do we need to learn from him at this point in our lives? How is the Spirit leading us?

This book is meant to be a companion for personal prayer. You can use it as a private retreat. Find a comfortable place to pray. Light a candle. Read a reflection. Thoughts or questions from your own experience may arise. Bring them to God in a spiritual conversation. Then, take time to just listen. When you are ready, close your session with the Lord's Prayer or any other prayer you like.

Although coming from the Catholic tradition, these reflections, rooted in Scripture, can offer nourishment to all Christians. For those who observe the liturgical seasons, these reflections are especially apt for Lent. You can begin the Prelude during the week of Ash Wednes-

day. The six sections, each with seven reflections, can correspond to the weeks of Lent.

We are always on our spiritual journey. That journey signifies the way of discipleship and prepares us for what we cannot yet see. It is the road that leads to Jerusalem, in the footsteps of the one who went before us.

*Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." (Luke 9:23-24)*

## PRELUDE

### *The Road*

The disciple simply burns his boats and goes ahead. . . .  
The disciple is dragged out of his relative security into a  
life of absolute insecurity . . . out of the realm of the finite  
. . . into the realm of infinite possibilities.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

## Purpose

*As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:57-62)*

The "journey" is such a rich image in human consciousness. It shows up frequently in the arts, in literature, and in film. It may be the travels of Odysseus, Huck Finn, Dorothy, or Frodo. Someone has to get from here to there. But the journey is not just about "getting there." It's about what we learn on the way.

In Luke's gospel, when Jesus determines to set out for Jerusalem, he invites people along the way to follow him. One person seems eager. "I will follow you wherever you go." But this one is cautioned: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." When we start out on a journey, we may not appreciate the costs involved. We are looking for an easy ride and cheap thrills. But this journey entails more.

There's a spiritual geography to navigate. Depth will be called out of us. Self-honesty will be demanded. Are we ready for the investment? Are we committed for the duration? Are we "all in?"

Another says, "*Lord, first let me go and bury my father.*" In both the Jewish and pagan understanding at that time, burying a parent was the highest duty. How strange to hear the words: "*Let the dead bury their own dead. . . .*" This is inconceivable. But Jesus is speaking about the consequences of being spiritually dead. He's talking about the inner journey. He's saying: The importance and urgency of being on this journey with me surpasses anything else in your life. If you don't yet see that, you could be fulfilling obligations with no awareness, burying the dead when you are dead yourself.

Someone else simply wants to say goodbye to those at home. But that one is told: "*No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.*" It sounds so harsh. But what are we really looking back toward? To what lengths do we go in order to avoid that inner calling we sense? We must be ready to let go of what was—the familiar patterns we've gotten so used to, the things that comfort us and medicate us—if we want something new in our lives. Be open to finding something new, we're being told, something that addresses our deepest questions and highest hopes. That newness is what Jesus calls the kingdom of God. Everything pales when compared to it. And everything is enlivened when we seek it.

Prophetic words can seem harsh at times. But they are also practical. They speak to our core identity, our depths, and from there daily decisions and actions flow.

Perhaps you've seen or read some of the many books written by business gurus that promise to turn your company around. They deal with organizational structures, strategic planning, time management, and assessment. Or, think of the self-help tapes or podcasts that purport to improve your personal life and relationships. They all get very nitty-gritty and practical. But the best of them usually begin by addressing the question of purpose. One must ask: What is most important to me? What are my deepest values?

You must take another road to handle those questions. You must listen to your soul. Our soul, that deep life within us, created in the image of God, is not fed with superficiality, with illusion, with junk food. It's fed with authenticity. It's fed with truth, love, and service. Here, in the depth dimension of our lives, we are open to the movement of God's own Spirit. Motives are purified, goals are inspired, action is stirred. We remember who we are and consider what is most important in life.

How do we put our time and energy to work on a daily basis? Are we just managing the crises on our "to do" list, wasting energy on what is not very important to us? Or, are we listening to our souls? The smallest things can relate to our purpose: getting the kids to school, calling the friend we've lost touch with, attending to a customer, volunteering in the community, getting

to church. All these can be ways of advancing our priorities and core values. All can be ways of choosing forgiveness, freedom, generosity, compassion. *“Let the dead bury their own dead. . . .”* This journey is all about life.

*They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32)*

Roads run all through the Scriptures. Another source, the famous poem by Robert Frost, offers some grist as well:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.<sup>1</sup>

If we were to trace our path through life up till now, our impressions might vary greatly. Sometimes the road we travelled was wide and smooth, a superhighway. Other times, it was a rocky and narrow path, winding and treacherous. Sometimes it was well lit and easy to maneuver. Other times it was dark, and we couldn't see what lay ahead. Sometimes we had lots of company. Other times we felt alone.

On this road, may we discover the one who meets us wherever we are and calls us by name—the only one who can open the Scriptures for us and inflame our hearts, who brings food for the journey and enlightens the great road ahead of us.



## ONE

### *The Desert*

The beginner must look upon himself as making a garden, wherein our Lord may take His delight, but in a soil unfruitful and abounding in weeds.

—Teresa of Avila, *The Life*

## Sin and Grace

In the fourth century, in Egypt, there were individuals known as the Desert Fathers and the Desert Mothers. These were people who left the cities and went out into the wilderness to live out their lives. Many of their sayings have been collected. In fact, one of the first Christian biographies was about one of them: St. Anthony of the Desert. People still read it.

These Desert Fathers and Mothers make it clear that they were not fleeing the evils of the city in order to find an easier way of life, an easier way to live their faith. They went to the desert to do battle. They saw themselves as spiritual warriors, going out to confront demons and to fight evil.

Where is the “battleground” for us? Ignatius of Loyola, in his “Spiritual Exercises,” calls the devil “the enemy of our human nature.” Going to the desert can mean going deeper within ourselves. There is a wilderness where we are tempted to turn away from our true identity, our true humanity.

*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12-13)*

After being baptized in the Jordan River, Jesus must have felt ready for action. He must have been eager to

begin his public work and teaching. But the first place the Spirit directs him to go is to the wilderness. The Spirit leads him to a forty-day retreat in the desert. There he is tempted in every way human beings are—by acquisition, power, ego, deception. He's tempted to live a less human life, to "sell out." He doesn't avoid that test. He confronts it and sees through it. He confronts the enemy and holds on to his humanity before God.

What will it mean for us to go to the desert? It obviously is not an easy course. It is not a tour through back-country in an air-conditioned tour bus. This desert is not safe. There are dangers, beasts. But there is also the promise of truth, insight, and authentic growth.

I once heard someone use the term "lollipop theology." The person didn't have to define it. I could figure out what was being critiqued: a false, easy theology that avoids discomfort or doesn't "tell it like it is." It's a good point. It's not always clear, though, where the lollipops are lurking.

A preacher told me about a parishioner of his who approached him and asked, "Why don't we hear about sin more often?" Again, good point. A preacher who isn't dealing with the realities of both sin and grace needs some critiquing! However, the preacher had a feeling the parishioner was really asking, "Why can't you tell me: 'this is a sin'; 'that's a sin'; 'this can be a sin under certain circumstances' . . .?"

Moral theologians have a term for those questions: it's called "casuistry." There's certainly a time and place for

that, for applying general principles to particular circumstances, as a help to guide our consciences. Yet, there's also a way in which relying on certain words and pat answers can be comforting, a lollipop, while the deeper call to a truer, more virtuous life goes unheeded.

Maybe we're not ready for that call. We'd rather have lollipops. If all you're interested in is whether "this" or "that" is a sin, you may not appreciate just how dangerous, how destructive, sin is. You may not understand the hold it can have on people, or how deep it runs. Capital "S" sin is a condition in humanity, a deep disruption. It's alienation, fear, deceit, illusion. It's a rejection of God's love and goodness; a rejection of what it means to be human. Getting at it requires going deeper than particular actions or inactions. It means looking beneath them. Actions can certainly be sinful; but, what deeper sinful attitudes underlie them?

*Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. . . .*

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in*

*the garden?” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-5)*

It started with our first parents, as Genesis tells us, who were not satisfied with their own humanity. It wasn't enough to be loved by God as they were; they had to be gods, something other than what they were. Human beings chose illusion, falsehood, blame, attack, pride. And it has snowballed ever since, giving rise to actions and inactions on every scale: personal, social, and global. I like the assertion attributed to G. K. Chesterton that original sin is the only Christian doctrine that's announced in the newspapers every day.

The “desert” helps us to go deeper. When we turn off our distractions and start seeing things as they are, ourselves as we are, what will we find? One thing the Desert Mothers and Fathers found is something they called “acedia.” It's a vice they defined as a kind of spiritual boredom or indifference, an aimlessness or coldness. They saw it at the root of so many destructive tendencies: lust for power, harmful busy-ness, isolation, cynicism, fear of vulnerability. Some pastoral theologians use the image of “warm sins” and “cold sins.” Warm sins have to do with excess, and they say most

people are obsessed with those. But it's the cold sins, they say, that should concern us more. They arise from acedia: from fear of passion, or a calculated apathy. They signal a dying soul.

If you are familiar with Dante's *Inferno*, you know that the poet's journey through the rings of hell finally brings him to the center point where Satan is encased in ice. A strange image? Saint Anthony of the Desert would probably find it fitting. Beneath the fires, the anger, hurting, blaming, and violence is that coldness that refuses to abandon itself to the love of God.

The road we're on invites us into the desert, the wilderness within, to do battle. It can be a time for coming to understand more deeply the destructive power of sin and the life-giving power of grace. We need to see how we've gotten into this mess, and how we can get out of it. What really changes people? Where's the power that liberates, heals, and saves?

We need to spend time with this, because that's where the gospel spends its time. That's why we call it "good news." It's a way out of sin. It answers our deepest questions and needs. It brings us to life.



## Adam

So if we want to avoid that so-called "lollipop theology," we had better ask ourselves what being a faithful adult

is like. How do we mature in faith? We might ask how we mature in any area of our life. We grow—physically, emotionally, relationally—in stages. Our psychosocial development occurs as we confront new experiences and our minds are stretched. On one level we must be ready for more growth, and then life provides events and tasks that demand it. Developmental theorists speak of “crises” that every individual must confront and negotiate as part of growing up. These include finding a sense of personal and group identity, searching for meaningful work, falling in love, and dealing with death.

Growth doesn't happen in a vacuum. It involves other people who accompany, challenge, or mentor us. Maturity involves relating to other people. The same can be said of spiritual development. It doesn't just happen in private prayer. There are personal and communal, private and public dimensions to our growth in faith. A church community provides places and events where we can express our beliefs and find support for our personal growth. We need that group identity. We need to know we have companions on the journey. Do we have someone with whom we can share our faith journey? Do we have models or mentors we can look up to and ask advice from?

Some churches have specific rites or sacraments related to this kind of personal sharing. Others experience this on retreats or in spiritual direction with friends or pastors. These can be great occasions for growth. But it isn't automatic. I heard a priest once refer to the confessional in his church (the place set aside for people to

come and confess their sins and seek guidance) as a “time machine.” He said it wasn’t uncommon for an adult to walk into it and suddenly be back in the third grade!

When we try to evaluate our discipleship, or examine our conscience, and find that we are having the same experience as we did in the third grade, we’re still on lollipops. We must allow the Spirit to stretch us, to help us grow in our spiritual lives as we do in every other area of life. Priests who celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation will often try to guide those who come to them to look below specific actions or omissions, to the attitudes and fears at their root. They may ask the penitent to deal with the question: “What is keeping me from being all the Lord is calling me to be?” That’s about allowing the light to shine into the dark corners of our life, and claiming the power that God’s grace offers us. That’s the beginning of a new life.

*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.*

*But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the*

*free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:15-17)*

Saint Paul's letter to the Romans may be his most complex epistle. Yet its imagery can be both simple and profound. Here he refers to both Adam and Jesus as "types" (we might say "brands," or modes of being). Just as we are united in the first Adam, in our common humanity, in both our created goodness and our fallen nature, so we can be united in the new Adam, in a new way of being that transcends our old selves.

What is the way out of the disruption, the suffering, and the destructiveness that come from sin? What is the way to restoration, to healing, and to a fuller life? People do not change because they are given a law, or because they experience guilt, or because they have a lot of will power. We cannot muster an adequate response to sin on our power alone. Sin is a bigger problem, and it needs a bigger solution. We need a higher power.

People change through an experience. Experience is all encompassing. Experience shines through the spirit of the law. Experience is what the gospels testify to. It is an experience that recognizes the gracious love of God poured out in Christ, the new Adam, who entered our

human condition, who went to those deepest, darkest places, into the disruption, illusion, and fear, into sin and death itself. He went there and shined a light. He brought God's love and mercy there, into that darkness.

How do things start to change? Through an encounter with Jesus—an experience that renews our minds, captures our imaginations, and reorders our lives.

Our spiritual maturity comes both personally and communally. We're in this together. We're united to Adam, sharing the same human nature, and to the new Adam, sharing the promise found in him. And so we go to the desert, not alone, but together. We go to pray together and to repent together. We go together to meet the Lord. That is the way of growth, of maturity.

*Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.*  
(Romans 5:18-19)



## The First Desert

*When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you*

*possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." (Deuteronomy 26:1-9)*

Moses led the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt to the Promised Land, the place where they would be free to be themselves. Along the way he instructed them in the laws and rituals that they would carry out once they got there. But before they got there, they had to cross a

desert. The distance was not great, yet it took them forty years. It shouldn't have, but it did. What made the journey so hard? Why were there so many obstacles?

The people had been slaves for generations in Egypt. They had absorbed the messages of slavery. They thought of themselves as slaves, acted like slaves. They thought of themselves as having no worth. It's not easy to get to the Promised Land after all that. It's not easy to change your whole view of yourself. As much as we human beings wish we could get everything we want in a hurry, in an instant, there is much learning that has to happen first—and much unlearning.

The people of Israel had to pass through the desert to learn how to be free. They had to stop thinking of themselves as slaves—and start thinking and acting as free people. They had to realize what it means to be God's people, to have worth, to have dreams, to be loved.

People have to learn through experience how to be free. For the Israelites, that meant dealing with obstacles. It meant a lot of falling down and getting up again. There were times they wanted to quit, to go back to being slaves in Egypt. That was familiar territory. At least their masters gave them food. But this desert was too hard. It demanded too much from them.

They learned God's patience. They learned that when they were hungry, God would lead them to food. When they were thirsty, water would flow from the rocks. They learned to trust in the God of their liberation, the one who had sparked the idea of freedom in

them and taught them to hope for a better life. This God believed in them. This God would guide them through the desert and make them ready to receive the promise.

Some never made it, though. In fact, most of the slave generation died off in the desert. But they died passing on the dream to their children. Even Moses only gets to the edge of the Promised Land. What a story our spiritual ancestors tell us from that desert!

Where's our Promised Land? Where's the treasure for us? What is truly valuable? Deep, deep within, what are you yearning for? Before you get there, you may have to wander through a desert. You may not be ready to receive it yet. You have to be prepared for it. You must learn some things first. Now, if you're like me, you probably don't want to hear that. But the message of this desert is: Trust. Someone is leading you.

*“So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 26:10)*

Moses gives the people a ritual that they must perform at the time of the harvest. We might normally think of harvest festivals as happy events. This is the time, Moses tells them, when you are to remember the desert. Remember all that your ancestors went through to bring you to this place. Remember the cost of your growth. When you think of where you've come from, it will challenge you to consider where you are going. Are you

still moving towards freedom? There are always forces at work that want to pull you back into slavery. So, you must remember who you are and who God is for you.

Bring “*the first of all the fruit of the ground*” to God at this time, Moses tells them. Bring the best you have to offer, and put it before the altar of God. This is a recognition of the source of our gifts, a remembrance of the most valuable thing in our lives.

For us, a “desert experience” is an opportunity to look deeper into ourselves and ask: Are we still moving towards freedom? What slaveries, addictions or fears keep us from the Promised Land? What do we value most in our lives? Where is our treasure? Are we learning from our failures? Do we get up after we fall?

This is a time to remember our best and bring the “first fruits” to the altar of God; a time to remember what God has done for us, and to consider what God sees in us. It is time to let God prepare us for a new kind of freedom.



## The Second Desert

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these*