“Lord, Help My Unbelief”

* A Pilgrim’s Story
* Lori Buckle

In York Minster, the cathedral in the English city where I used to live, there is a famous window called “The Pilgrimage Window.” Two panels within this window usually draw the most attention from onlookers. The first shows a knight upon a white horse, holding a triumphant banner. He appears to be venturing forth on a pilgrimage. However, whenever I came to contemplate this window, it was not the knight’s panel that drew me. Rather, I was drawn to the second panel, which shows a woman walking in front of a white horse, traveling on a pilgrimage of her own. At first I could not explain her mysterious hold upon me. Then gradually the meaning unfolded, and I realized the difficulty of what this panel represented. I have since experienced my own pilgrimage, and I know how much it costs. Leaving the comfort and safety of your familiar surroundings, you embark upon a journey to find God. Before that, however, you must come to the realization that you do not fully know God, but possess a desire to know him as he really is. If you are a woman who has been raised within the patriarchal Christian tradition, then most of the time this is where your journey ends: with a deep ache, with an inchoate desire to find God on your own and discover whether what you have been taught about him is really all there is to know, or whether there are yet undiscovered divine secrets waiting for you.

For some women raised within a patriarchal culture, it may be easier to remain within the castle than to journey outwards and face the unknown hazards that lay ahead. To go on a pilgrimage like this requires that you travel alone and meet God face-to-face. True pilgrimage requires that, like Moses, you leave the others behind and journey up the mountain by yourself. Many of us find it easier to side with the children of Israel, and simply send somebody up to find God for us.

“Pilgrimage is a potentially dangerous and subversive act since it defies being fixed. Its very nature is that of movement. Movement suggests change which suggests, in turn, the overturning of order.”

~Susan Signe Morrison
“Lord, Help My Unbelief,” Continued

Perhaps some women are uneasy to leave the walls of patriarchy for fear that liberals and feminists and other “dragons” may be waiting to trap unwary souls, dragging them away from God’s true path and down into the cave of perdition. Better to remain within the castle walls, with the lords temporal and spiritual—your father/husband—and to let them protect you, than to venture out and do battle on your own. After all, who knows what you might lose in the process?

If I sound too harsh when I speak of the fear of these women, then it is the harshness of regret. I myself spent too many years within the castle walls before I finally ventured out on a pilgrimage of my own. The journey was difficult and not without frustration, but I completed it, and found that, indeed, God was much bigger than I had imagined. Now I feel God calling me to go on a second pilgrimage, one that will, like the first, profoundly change my life. And this time the dragons seem much bigger.

Writing as Pilgrimage

Since my first pilgrimage laid the foundation for the second, I might as well begin with an ending. “You made it!” my husband exclaimed as soon as he entered the door, and he threw open his arms to embrace me. I had been waiting for him to bring the verdict of our district lay preacher’s meeting—would they accept my application to begin training with them? As a Methodist lay preacher himself, my husband encouraged me to follow my calling and join him, and I eagerly applied. However, doubts had assailed me while I waited. Since childhood, I had dreamed of becoming a preacher like my father. But I had also spent most of my life believing that my desire to proclaim God’s word from a pulpit was sinful. This tension between desire and belief had tormented me for years, and leaving behind that belief system had been a long and difficult process. I could not bear to think that just when my dream seemed within my grasp, it could be snatched from me once more.

But God heard my cry, and my dream was fulfilled. As I blossomed into a local preacher over the next few months, I found that a spring of creativity welled up within me also. Ever since childhood I had loved writing stories. As I grew older, however, I tucked them away as “childish things” (1 Cor. 13:11). After all, if God did not like my preaching, then why should he like my scribbling?

Now, however, I am embarking on my second pilgrimage because my passion for writing has returned. Specifically, I find myself wanting to write about the Minster. Visiting there, I felt a connection to those faithful Christian women who had gone before me. Like many other Americans, I was raised in a kind of spiritual vacuum where theological history was concerned. I rarely even encountered Christian history, much less learned of the leadership of Christian women. Here in the Minster, however, I was “surrounded by that great cloud of [female] witnesses” (Heb. 12:1). There were many women here—inscribed in wall monuments, carved as statues, and featured in stained glass windows.

“Since childhood, I had dreamed of becoming a preacher like my father.”
Indeed, the Minster itself was founded with the indirect help of a woman. In AD 625, the bishop Paulinus accompanied the Christian Princess Ethelburga when she married King Edwin, a pagan. Two years later, when Edwin himself became a Christian, Paulinus built a small wooden church in York in which to baptize the king. Over the centuries the wooden structure was replaced with the current cathedral.

A vision came to me in this grand cathedral. What if, instead of merely having a church with images of women here and there, like the Minster, you had an entire church filled with such images? As I contemplated this, I remembered what Sue Monk Kidd had said in her memoir, Dance of the Dissident Daughter. Growing up in the patriarchal tradition, as I did, she wrote that she felt oppressed in her church because the windows were filled with images of men. The great men of the Bible were well represented, but where, she wondered, were the women? This feeling that women of faith were not really valued helped contribute to her eventual abandonment of Christianity.

The religion that Kidd and I had grown up believing silenced women, rendering them passive and mute. Their voices were heard only when men allowed them to speak, and their stories were told only if men allowed them to be told. Standing in the Minster reminded me of what Jaroslav Pelikan wrote in his book, Mary Through the Centuries: "Many of the mighty women of the history of the Middle Ages...are known to us chiefly or even solely through the medium of what men wrote down from them or about them." What if we reclaimed our voices, though, and our stories? What if there was a church whose windows and walls were filled with women, women of the Bible and of ages past to remind present-day women of the godly heritage they are a part of?

For instance, in the Minster, there is a monument to William Wilberforce, the great British politician who led the crusade to end slavery in the British Empire in the early 1800’s. I had heard about this crusade in church. What I did not hear, however, was that many women helped contribute to this moral victory. For example, it was women such as Lady Middleton (along with her husband) who urged Wilberforce to take up the cause of abolition. They and other Christians of the time who opposed slavery, such as the Quaker Hannah Moore, formed a group called the Testonites, which repeatedly petitioned Parliament to end slavery. Later, a woman friend of Theodore Pringle’s (he doesn’t name her), took down the story of the runaway slave Mary Prince and urged him to publish it. When he did, many women flocked to the abolitionist cause. Nearly 200,000 of these women signed a petition to end slavery and had it presented to Parliament. Indeed, in her book Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich proclaims: “Their efforts [Pringle’s female friend and women such as Moore and Middleton] and of those of other female abolitionists helped to bring about an act of Parliament that in 1838 ended slavery in the British West Indies.” Surely then, I thought, these brave women deserved some sort of monument of their own? What if there was a monument...
“Lord, Help My Unbelief,” Continued

to these forgotten women in this Church of the Ladies of God? Imbued with the fervor of this vision, I began sketching notes of the church that I saw.

As I sketched, the dazzling centerpiece of the church appeared before me: a series of statues of biblical women, behind the altar itself. You see, behind the altar of the Minster stood fifteen statues of English kings. Suppose, I thought, instead of these monuments to war, greed, and lust, there were fourteen monuments to the faith and courage of mighty women in the Bible? Two sets of seven statues—the number seven being used to represent God. Hagar the outsider whom God still blessed; Miriam who led the Israelite women in worship; Huldah who prophesied the destruction of Israel; Mary the sister of Lazarus who dared buck patriarchal convention to sit at Jesus’ feet and learn; Martha, who called Jesus the Messiah and yet, unlike Peter, remained faithful to him all the way to the end.

Battles with Dragons

But once I began venturing out upon this second pilgrimage—my pilgrimage of writing the story of this women’s church—the dragon was quick to strike. A friend of mine let me know how much my story encouraged her. She and her husband struggled to overcome the broken legacy of patriarchy in their own marriage. How blessed I was to love a man who had grown up never doubting that women were equal in the eyes of God, she told me.

The words of my friend touched something deep within me, and I heard the Lord whispering, “Write your story.” So I began writing it. Then I made my mistake. I ventured into a forum for Christian writers and asked what they thought of my story. Their response was swift and merciless. They would never buy it and certainly would never read it. It was too controversial. “For heaven’s sake,” they said, “you are talking about a woman preacher!” as if the term were synonymous with female murderer. And thus my beloved story died—a baby I had carried with me for months, but which I could not bear to now send out into the cruel world.

It has been two years since that rejection. In the interval, my husband and I concentrated on surviving the many difficulties that beset us. Now the Lord has led us to settle in America, and we attend a holiness church that allows women to preach and teach. I have already begun to move into this area of my calling in our church, so I sense that this particular pilgrimage in my life is coming to an end. However, writing this article has reawakened my deep desire to write, and this time I have determined not to let the dragons keep me in the castle. I have already taken the first tentative step outside of the walls; this is the first time I have set forth my story in public. Now I have taken out my battered notes about the Church of the Ladies of God and have begun to examine them again. Perhaps my story has not died after all. Perhaps it will become a published book someday. Perhaps there will even be a real...
“Lord, Help My Unbelief,” Continued

church, where women can come to be encouraged, healed, and affirmed—a living, breathing Church of the Ladies of God. I don’t know what will happen. As I struggle with my doubts and fears along this difficult path, however, I imagine myself back in front of the Pilgrimage Window, praying the prayer of the pilgrims (Mark 9:24): “Lord, I do believe; help my unbelief.”

Author’s Note:

See the Pilgrimage Window or take a virtual tour of the entire Minster. (From the heart-shaped window, the Pilgrimage Window is the 4th on the right.)

LORI L. BUCKLE was born in Texas. In 2004 she moved to Great Britain after marrying her British husband. They now live in back in Texas where Lori is pursuing a career as a writer.