**DREW MILLER:** This podcast is brought to you by Lifeway and the Christian Standard Bible

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**LISA DEAM:** Writing is a great challenge and a lengthy process. It takes a lot out of us. When we write, we’re on a journey. We can’t always see the end, although we’re always working towards it. So in that way, writing is a pilgrimage.

**JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I’m Jonathan Rogers, your host.

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** Lisa Deam is an art historian with a specialty in the medieval area. As she delved deeper into medieval art and history, she says, she discovered that the time period spoke to her as a Christian even more than a scholar.

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**JR:** Her new book is *3,000 Miles to Jesus*. It’s about the pilgrimages that medieval Christians took to Jerusalem and other holy sites, and how the pilgrimage serves as a model for all spiritual seekers.

Lisa Deam, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast today.

**LD:** Thank you for having me!

**JR:** So your book is called *3,000 Miles to Jesus*… remind me of the subtitle?

**LD:** *Pilgrimage as a Way of Life for Spiritual Seekers.*

**JR:** Okay. All right. I learned so much about medieval — I mean, I knew that people did pilgrimages of course in the Middle Ages, but it hadn’t occurred to me that there was one route that everybody in Europe took, that you’d get to Venice I guess. However you get to Venice, and then you sail over. I guess I kind of imagined they were going all sorts of paths.

**LD:** Well, it became codified like that in the later Middle Ages.

**JR:** Uh huh. And so that path that ultimately became codified, for you, becomes a way of talking about our life as pilgrimage. So I wanna hear about that. Tell me… when you describe this book to people, what do you tell them?

**LD:** Well, I tell them this book follows primarily three pilgrims who set out on an amazing journey in the 1400s to Jerusalem, and this book invites us to travel along with them. So the book is structured as a journey because I really wanted it to be more of an experience and not just a series of lessons. So we take the journey with them from their preparations to all their challenges and the different routes they went to, all the way until they reach their destination. And as we travel with them, we learned that great truth that you mentioned, that all of life is a pilgrimage.

**JR:** So how did… writing a book is a long process.

**LD:** Yes.

**JR:** A challenging process. A kind of pilgrimage. How did the idea of pilgrimage get you through the process of writing this book?

**LD:** Well, as it turns out, one of my favorite quotes about writing actually frames it as a pilgrimage. So a friend of mine who’s a Benedictine oblate said, “Writing is a slow pilgrimage whereby as we walk with our hands, our fingers bleed.” And I think that’s a marvelous quote. A slow pilgrimage where our fingers bleed.

I think that speaks to the fact that writing is a great challenge and a lengthy process. It takes a lot out of us and our fingers bleed. When we write, we’re on a journey. We can’t always see the end, although we’re always working towards it. So in that way, writing is a pilgrimage. But I don’t want to just hit the challenging parts, like, how did I get through it? Because writing is tough, but also a joy. I think it takes a lot out of us, but like a pilgrimage it gives a lot to us.

One thing I love about pilgrimage and writing is that I was able to write this book because pilgrims who came before wrote about their journeys. So in a sense, writing about their writing.

**JR:** Yeah.

**LD:** If you notice, pilgrims, I think of all ages, seem to feel an urge to write about their experiences. If you look at all the books we have today on people’s experience on the Camino del Santiago in Spain, for example. I think when pilgrims write about their experience, this urge… it seems to be a desire to help those who come after. I love that. It’s about providing signposts.

It can be done in different ways. In the earlier Middle Ages, a pilgrimage travel account might just be really bare bones. It might be a series of place names, cities, and the distance between them, and that’s all it is. In the later Middle Ages, the pilgrims I wrote about in my book fleshed it out a lot more and provided their personal experience and a lot of travel tips. But in cases, they’re writing for people who came after them. I think in many ways that’s what writing in general is about.

**JR:** That’s great. I love that idea that all writers, like so many pilgrims, are writing for the people who come after them and saying here’s where I’ve been. Here’s what I’ve seen on my journey. And of course the people who come after will see some of the same things, but will see some other things too.

**LD:** Oh yes. I think writing is providing signposts for those who come after. All kinds of writing. Fiction, nonfiction… we’re writing for others.

**JR:** Yeah. I love it. One thing I thought about as I was thinking about — as I was reading your book and thinking about writing as a pilgrimage, one thing you are very clear about is the challenges on the path that come in the middle. Writing a book length work… it’s exciting to start and it’s thrilling to finish, but then you’ve got that whole middle. The pilgrims you wrote about… not too long after they leave home, they’re faced with the Alps, and they have to get over the Alps one way or another. Then they get to Venice, and the ship that takes them across the Mediterranean, who knows when it’s gonna leave. There’s all this uncertainty in the middle and difficulty in the middle. And that seems… let’s just talk about that a little bit.

**LD:** The long middle?

**JR:** The long middle, that’s right.

**LD:** (laughs)

**JR:** In writing, so much of the time you’re just in the middle.

**LD:** Yeah.

**JR:** The whole thing’s the middle.

**LD:** Yeah. I have to say, I really actually love the writing process. I… there is a long middle, but writing and seeing it come together… it’s hard, but for me really, it’s like a spiritual practice actually. Working out my faith, and really working out what I believe. And I was really actually grieving a little when I was done, when that particular journey is over.

**JR:** Yeah.

**LD:** I mean, I really do love even the tough parts. But yes, I like that connection you make. When you’re writing, you do need to get over the Alps, or you may have to wait in Venice… just wait a long time. And… (pause) What pilgrims did that helped them — one thing — was to focus on their destination, their goal. One of the mystics I write about that helps spiritual pilgrims says, “Say to yourself ‘I want to be in Jerusalem.’” Tell your enemies — all those thoughts in your head or your inner critic — tell them to go away and say to yourself, “I want to be in Jerusalem.” Focus on your destination as a way to give you hope. Not that it necessarily magically makes it easier, but it gives us that longing that we need.

**JR:** Yeah, and I think it’s — the only way to get to Jerusalem is to — the only way through it is through it. (laughs)

**LD:** It’s the only way.

**JR:** And one thing I wanna… now I can’t remember where in the book I’m getting this from, but the idea that on the one hand I know I’m going to Jerusalem, I know the destination. But on the other hand, you kind of don’t know. There’s that prayer from Thomas Merton that you quote.

**LD:** Yes.

**JR:** I wrote it down: “Lord, I have no idea where I’m going. I cannot see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end.” And embracing that uncertainty in the process of writing — I know Thomas Merton wasn’t talking about writing, and I don’t wanna turn your book into writing tips. But I’m just interested in these ideas as they relate to writers. Cause I know for me, I need to have some general idea. I won’t start a big project unless I have some idea where I’m going. But once I get in the middle I realize I didn’t know where I was going.

**LD:** Yes.

**JR:** And to embrace that, and to be willing to um… what’s the word I’m looking for? To be willing to not just accept, but embrace that truth, really leaves me open to write something better than what I had in mind at the beginning.

**LD:** Oh, I agree with that. Yes, both for writing and the spiritual life. It’s one of the paradoxes and tensions of pilgrimage that I’ve learned to embrace. We do know where we’re going, at least in real in life, but at the same time we don’t know. As Thomas Merton said, “I have no idea where I’m going.” There’s a tension, and I used to wanna really try to resolve that tension. But that’s what the path is. We know, and we don’t know. And I think that’s what makes everyone’s path also be different and unique. It’s not like it’s a formula.

But to embrace the uncertainty… and in writing too. I’m a big outliner. I like to have things just really set out. But even… and in this book I had it pretty set out, because I knew I wanted to follow the pilgrims’ journey step by step. So I had the structure. I want to follow them to Jerusalem, every step of the way. But I was still surprised in the middle. There were plenty of surprises. I ended up adding a chapter that I hadn’t planned. There’s always a surprise. And I think we do write to find out what we want to say and to wrestle with our faith, and we don’t always know where we want to go.

**JR:** Yeah. A map is a very different thing from a journey.

**LD:** Yes.

**JR:** Any journey can be diagrammed on a map, but that’s very different from seeing the mountains or facing the robbers or whatever it is that happens on that journey.

**LD:** Right, we don’t know when we’re right there. You can’t see over the Alps.

**JR:** Yeah, yeah. If I remember correctly, you quote Augustine — and I may be misquoting Augustine when I say, “Everywhere I go, my desires are taking me there.” My longing is taking me there. And so that notion of reminding yourself “I want to be in Jerusalem” is, again, it is my desire, it’s my longing that takes me. Whether it’s taking me, by the way, down the right path or the wrong path, it’s my desire that’s taking me there. I think that’s so important not just for writing. A realization that’s not just important for writing, but for everything else.

One thing you say about these pilgrims is they’re really inefficient and they embrace inefficiency. And… (pause) what do you mean by that?

**LD:** Okay. Well… what I mean is, when we think about the way that we want to travel today — for example, since we’re talking about journeys. Unless it’s a specific kind of trip, if we have a destination, we usually want to get there as quickly as we can, and usually with a very direct route.

**JR:** Okay.

**LD:** We don’t want a holdup. We don’t want a detour. We don’t want a delay. We want to get there. And a pilgrimage, by contrast… it twists, it turns, it stops, it pauses. It cannot be rushed.

**JR:** Yeah. I was in the Dallas airport yesterday, and I went through the TSA line for trainees, and they said, “This is gonna take longer.” But I’d gotten there early, and I said fine, whatever. I went through it, and it took them probably 10, 15 minutes to get me through security. And it was really strange… and I’d just read your book a couple days earlier, and I was thinking about how frustrating that inefficiency was, but it was only 10 or 15 minutes later. But Margery of Kempe — am I saying her name right?

**LD:** Mmhm. Margery Kempe.

**JR:** Was stuck in Venice for how many months before her ship…?

**LD:** Yep. For three months before her ship came in.

**JR:** But again, that inefficiency… that’s where the real action is, right? That’s where you’re forced to slow down, and as our… that’s where our life comes to us. We’re so desirous of control and efficiency that we ignore the fact that that’s where life comes to us, in those places where we’re out of control or slowing down. And again, at the risk of turning everything into a writing lesson, it is those moments of inefficiency where… that’s where story ideas come from. You’re an academic, and surely you remember — or your’e conscious of the difference between googling for information and wandering through the stacks to find information.

**LD:** Oh, absolutely!

**JR:** Most of my education was just me getting to the book I was looking for and getting interrupted by, oh, that looks interesting and reading two pages out of a book and… you know. The great thing about Google is it gets you right there, and the terrible thing about Google is it gets you right there.

**LD:** Yeah, I miss that sooo much, wandering through the stacks. And there’s a difference, I think, between being efficient, or being productive, and getting good work done. I think our culture wants us to equate those two.

**JR:** Okay, and for one thing, efficiency assumes that I know where I need to be.

**LD:** Right.

**JR:** And if I were absolutely correct about where I need to be in any given moment and what I need to be doing, then efficiency really would be more of an obvious good than it is. But the truth is I don’t know where I’m supposed to be.

**LD:** Right. And one definition — when I was writing that part, I was sort of brainstorming what do we think efficiency is? And one definition I found was maximum productivity with minimum effort.

**JR:** (chuckles)

**LD:** So yeah, if you don’t want to waste time and effort, be efficient. So yeah, I just almost hate the word “maximum productivity.” Because I’m not really prolific as a writer, but does that mean I’m not productive? I don’t think it means the same thing.

**JR:** What’s the difference between prolific and productive?

**LD:** Well, I think “prolific” is producing a lot of work…

**JR:** Uh huh.

**LD:** … in a minimum amount of time. Like, these days when your book comes out — my book is releasing February 2nd — you’re supposed to have your next book proposal sent off. I don’t have my next book proposal ready! Um, so I’m not prolific, but I think that does not mean I’m not productive.

**JR:** Yeah.

**LD:** Like you said, I don’t always know where I wanna go, and I don’t want to force that. It takes a long time for me for ideas to steep and develop. And when they finally do, then they take me somewhere good, I think. Even when, as a writer, we’re waiting for that, and we’re daydreaming, we’re wandering the stacks, maybe without a totally clear purpose, I think that is productivity. It’s just not efficient.

**JR:** Are you familiar with Cal Newport’s book *Deep Work*?

**LD:** No, I’m not.

**JR:** It’s a great book. And I think it… the idea of his work, of that book, is that if you can stop wasting your time on things that actually are a waste of time — like checking Facebook constantly and that kind of stuff — it’s like a superpower. In this culture, it’s a superpower if you can resist electronics. And so he is actually very prolific in terms of the amount of work he puts out. But I think one idea of deep work is getting rid of all that waste — stuff that actually is a waste — so you can have time to waste wandering around in the stacks or whatever.

**LD:** No, I do believe that. Absolutely. I would be a little more prolific and a lot more deeply productive if I got rid of that kind of waste.

**JR:** Yes, right. But the leisure… to wander the stacks, or to read… to read another book. Maybe not read more articles on the internet. (laughs)

**LD:** Oh, heck yes.

**JR:** That wandering is… I know pilgrimage and wandering aren’t the same thing, but the embrace of the inefficiency, of acknowledging that I don’t necessarily… I need to be open to the world and wander around just a little bit.

**LD:** Yes, and I don’t have to get that next thing done this second.

**JR:** Mmhm.

**LD:** Yeah, I think both in the Christian spiritual life and in something like writing and work, inefficiency is a virtue.

**JR:** You mentioned in your book the “slow writing revolt,” and it’s something I’v heard of but I don’t really know what it is. Can you tell me more about that?

**LD:** Well, I first read about that — I don’t know how much literature there is on that, but I remember reading a blog post by the wonderful writer Lesile Leyland Fields a little while ago who had a post entitled “Slow Writing Revolt,” and then I heard a panel on that, Slow Writing and Slow Reading, at the Festival of Faith and Writing, and that was a handful of years ago. But it really spoke to me, because it gets back a little bit to what we were just saying about letting your ideas steep, letting yourself wander a little bit through your ideas, and making sure that it is what you want to say instead of feeling the pressure to come up with something on the next hot topic or before you’re ready.

In a blog post — if you’re throwing out a blog post, maybe that’s different. Although maybe it’s not…

**JR:** Yeah, I’m not sure it is.

**LD:** If all you’re feeling is pressure to get something out there, then I think she was saying maybe it’s better to not. Pause and think, because it’s not helping your writing.

**JR:** Yeah, this idea that we are all called upon to comment on every hot topic… even that phrase “hot take”…

**LD:** Hot taking.

**JR:** I can’t ever decide… some people use that ironically more than unironically, but I do think there have been times in the past few years where the idea of hot take was something we should all be shooting for or something. I don’t know. Just the phrasing of it though seems to tell us not to take it seriously.

**LD:** That’s true! Hot take, not thought through! (Laughs) No ideas here! And I have tried to do that… (laughs)

**JR:** (laughs)

**LD:** Several times. I’m not really good at it, and partly it’s because like the slow writing revolt… that really struck a chord because partly I think yes, that’s right on. Also, I think I’m a slow writer in the slow writer movement maybe by accident because I don’t jump on the bandwagon that quickly. I remember trying to write on The Da Vinci Code from an art historical and spiritual perspective, but it was just a little bit too late. I didn’t jump on it fast enough because my ideas were still forming, and by then there had been 60,000 hot takes on that.

**JR:** (laughs)

**LD:** So it doesn’t work especially well for me. I’m really like a pilgrim. I’m a plodder.

**JR:** Well good! I’m glad you’re plodding along. I know one of your areas of interest is contemplative prayer, and you have a website called The Contemplative Writer.

**LD:** Mmhm.

**JR:** So, what’s the connection between contemplative— well, I guess first, you can tell us what you mean by “contemplative prayer,” and then how is that relevant to the writing life?

**LD:** Well, to give a shout out to my friend Ed Cyzewski, a wonderful writer — he’s the one who began the Contemplative Writer website. And then —

**JR:** Okay.

**LD:** Yeah! I just wanna… and then I ended up taking it over so he could move on to other projects that he wanted to. So yeah, I love it. But we might define contemplative prayer… I like to think of contemplation as a whole lifestyle actually, and not just a time for prayer. But contemplative prayer is a non-wordy kind of prayer, where you’re kind of sitting in silence with God or… you know, maybe your spiritual presence, but in the Christian tradition with God… and trying… just to be in that presence without a lot of words.

And… as I talk, I’m thinking well maybe that is especially useful for writers, because we deal with so many words. Maybe it’s good to have a time when we’re not talking to God. Maybe we can just sit with Him and fill the well. And I think one of the other ideas is that there’s a long tradition in the Christian life of contemplation, or prayer, leading to action. Any kind of action. Is it social justice? Is it any kind of spiritual work? Your action has to spring from a deep well. It can’t come out of a void. And if it comes out of a poisonous well, it’s not going to do your action or your good works or anything any good. So it’s like a grounding for what we do. And it is supposed to lead to something. But it’s the idea that the contemplation, the filling the well, comes first. And that grounds us so that we remember why we’re writing, or what we’re pursuing social justice, or even why we’re volunteering somewhere, and things don’t become toxic.

For a writer, if we’re not grounded in who we really are maybe spiritually and why we’re writing, then we can get easily knocked off the path by things like comparison with other people, with the drive for success, like we talked about a minute ago, that… that lessens our ability to write well, if we’re so hung up on success. So that we have a grounding for our life.

**JR:** That’s good. I think it’s so important for writers to remember that writing doesn’t start with words.

**LD:** Oh yes, that’s a beautiful way to say it.

**JR:** Writing starts with reality, our taking in reality, and then, at some point, finding the words.

**LD:** Yeah, you’re right. Writing does not start with words. Even in this pilgrim book, it was more… an image or a series of images that was personally. I have some ideas for writing fiction. I don’t know what will come of it, but my idea right now is more an image, and I want to capture that. That comes before the words.

**JR:** Yeah. By the way, my favorite image from that book was when — I can’t remember which of the pilgrims, one of the men — when he came home, he finally made it home, and his fellow monks were at prayer and didn’t hear him knock on the door, and it was the dog that greeted him. The monastery dog. (Laughs) I love it.

**LD:** Isn’t that wonderful? Isn’t that how we want to come home?

**JR:** I don’t know what that means, right? The image itself is so beautiful, and our temptation is to turn that into some sort of metaphor or something, but I just love the image. And the image itself of the dog… and I also love that the monks were too busy praying, and when they were done, they were very glad to see him, right?

**LD:** Yeah. I love it.

**JR:** But there was a dog…

**LD:** Maybe that means we should all get a COVID puppy.

**JR:** That’s right! Yes! (Laughs)

**LD:** But you’re right, it’s a beautiful image that we don’t have to digest endlessly.

**JR:** Well, Lisa, I always end these conversations with the question, “Who are the writers who make you want to write?”

**LD:** Well… (pause) a true confession is when I was young… very young… (pause) Star Wars first made me want to write.

**JR:** Really.

**LD:** Well, so growing up in middle school, high school, my best friend and I wrote Star Wars fan fiction.

**JR:** (laughs)

**LD:** I don’t know if it’s where it *all* began, but that was a lot of fun. But these days in terms of themes and ideas, a couple of writers I really love are Susanna Clarke… who wrote *Piranesi*.

**JR:** I… this book is coming up so often among lots of people, and I have not read it. I’ve got to do that.

**LD:** Oh, you’ll love it. It’s just a beautiful… talk about imagery. There’s a beautiful sense of spiritual presence in the book. And then another writer I really like is Muriel Barbery who wrote *The Elegance of the Hedgehog.*

**JR:** Okay.

**LD:** She wrote it in French. It’s been translated into English, and the translation is really really good. And she writes about these wonderful themes of healing and deep connection coming out of isolation, and being able to experience friendship and connection. It’s funny and wise and wonderful.

**JR:** Oh good. That’s another one I’ve heard of and have not read, so I’m glad you mentioned that.

**LD:** And just… sometimes… (pause) to give a shout out to writers I know. As a historian, whether I want to write historical fiction one day or keep writing nonfiction, I want to bring the past alive. So two writers who help me think about that are um… Suzanne Wolfe and Candace Robb, and they both write historical mysteries and other books that just kind of show me how to make the past come alive, and how to use imagery. So to give a shoutout to them.

**JR:** Do they specialize in a particular era?

**LD:** Well, Candace Robb specializes in medieval mysteries, in medieval York, and that’s so wonderful and fun. And Suzanne Wolfe writes Elizabethan mysteries now, but she’s also the writer of *Confessions of X*, which is a novel based on St. Augustine’s concubine.

**JR:** Oh really.

**LD:** Yeah, a novelistic interpretation of what her life might have been like. And that just really opened up… you know, thinking about the past, to me. So.

**JR:** Yeah. The past is a foreign country, and yet… there were still people who lived there.

**LD:** Right. And that helps me approach them as people.

**JR:** Okay. Real quickly, we haven’t talked about Margery Kempe enough. So tell me just a little bit about her. She had 14 children? She was a pilgrim, one of the pilgrims you write about.

**LD:** Right.

**JR:** Real quickly — that was supposed to be the last question, but I wanna hear more about Margery Kempe, just for a minute.

**LD:** She was an interesting figure. She was a lay woman. So unlike the other pilgrims, she wasn’t a priest or cleric in the church. She was a lay woman who did have 14 children, and yet she had… and a mystic. So she had a deeply spiritual life. And apparently God placed on her heart, charged her, to go to Jerusalem. And… I don’t know? Was it a good thing or a bad thing that she left 14 children to go to Jerusalem? And we don’t really know is the thing. We don’t know if she left them in wonderful care or… so you know, we don’t know enough to truly judge, but she gets a lot of flack for that. And it’s interesting to think about. She left us this beautiful autobiography, and took this journey to Jerusalem where she had this vision of the crucified Christ that supposedly changed her life. And yet, she left her children at home to pursue this life as a mystic and a contemplative. So she’s interesting.

She also did not get along with her fellow travelers. They clashed, and they ended up abandoning her partway through her journey, and then she met up with them again, and then they abandoned her again…

**JR:** Oh, it’s the same ones who abandoned her on the way home too!

**LD:** Yes, when they finally got back to Venice, they said, “We wouldn’t travel with you for a hundred pounds!” So she just made her way on to do further pilgrimages. Was she a typical person? It seems like she might have been. But she has this… of the three pilgrims I talk about, she’s the one who’s the most fervent and personal, wanting to have this experience of Jesus. So it’s a real tension there.

**LD:** Yeah. Well, Lisa Deam, thank you so much. For me this has been a lot of fun, and I hope we can talk again soon. Maybe when you finally get around to writing your next book you can come back.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**LD:** Might be slow, but… thank you so much!

**JR:** I’ll still be here.

**LD:** This has been great. Thanks.

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Special thanks as well to Taylor Leonhardt for letting us use her song “Diamonds” as the theme music for Season 3 of The Habit Podcast. You can learn more about Taylor and follow her work at [taylorleonhardt.com](http://taylorleonhardt.com)

**JR:** The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at [TheHabit.co](http://TheHabit.co).

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

(PIANO MUSIC FADES UP)

**DM:** *Every Moment Holy Vol. 2: Death, Grief, and Hope* is a book of liturgies for seasons of dying and grieving. Liturgies such as “For the Scattering of Ashes,” “For the Loss of a Spouse,” or “For the Wake of a National Tragedy.” These are ways of reminding us that our lives are shot through with sacred purpose even when — especially when — suffering and pain threaten to overwhelm us.

(MUSIC FADES OUT)

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