

“You are Our Help” – Mark 11:1-11 (Palm Sunday 2015)

Well, it should come as no surprise that when I entered the gates of the old city of Jerusalem, no one met me there to shout “Hosanna!” I wish all of you had been with me for that trip, for that moment of entry. We could have taken turns shouting hosanna for each other.

In place of crowds holding palms aloft, tourists held cell phones overhead in an effort to get the best selfie angle.

I was travelling with a small group of pilgrims, and during the week preceding our time in Jerusalem, we worked our way along the Sea of Galilee, slowly making our way up out of the wilderness of the countryside. The pilgrimage I was on in February paralleled our own journey during this season of Lent here at Seattle First Baptist, where we’ve explored wilderness themes using the Gospel of Mark as our guide.

And now, on Palm Sunday, we can say we’ve made our way through Jericho, and up past Bethany and Bethpage on our way to the Holy City – up out of the wilderness – to reimagine crowds waving their palms.

It is a dramatic welcome as we leave behind the travels and travails of our wilderness wanderings and come up to this place and this time of celebration.

And yet, as Jesus arrived, Jerusalem was preparing for its own celebration. Mark reminds us that Jesus arrived in Jerusalem near the time of Passover. At Passover the Jewish people remember that night when the blood of the lamb was placed on doorposts before the final plague infiltrated Egypt – that night when Egyptians died, but Israelite children were unharmed – they were *passed over*. That night, which led to the Israelites’ release. It becomes a defining part of Jewish history. The Passover marks the moment that the Exodus began, and Jesus’ ancestors moved out into the... wilderness.

Palm Sunday signifies our initial exit up *out* of the wilderness and happens remarkably close to Passover, which for Jews marks the Exodus – the entrance *into* the wilderness. From one wilderness to another.

It looks like we'll be in the wilderness for a few more days. Suddenly I feel less like a pastor and more like Lucy pulling the football away from you, a sanctuary full of Charlie Browns. Perhaps I'll hear a few "Good griefs" in place of "Amens" this morning.

The Eyore inside of me says: "Back into the wilderness..."

Moving from one kind of wilderness to another is by no means a bad thing; it is often how we experience life.

When we overcome the wasteland of addiction, we don't move into settled oasis of sobriety. No, sobriety is its own kind of wilderness, which demands careful exploration and the guidance of friends or a community.

Or, when we've survived the solitude of loneliness, the experience of new love is one more movement through a different kind of wilderness, which requires patience, awareness, and intentionality.

Or, when we question *everything* and our faith becomes an act of wilderness *survival* – when the struggle inside of us echoes those words that Jim sang during the choir concert last week: "I'll believe in you, and you, and you, but who'll believe in me?"

When making sense is a senseless act, but we discover an old quote or prayer, and its beauty or truth reorients us.

When the journey to wholeness requires a new act of sacred pilgrimage up out of the pit and onto the new plane where the wilderness is lush, but requires no less effort to navigate in order to keep ourselves from falling into that low place again.

So we journey out of the wilderness into Jerusalem seeking reorientation, but the Holy City has a funny way of asking as many questions as it answers. Jewish scholar and theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel says, “All of Jerusalem is a gate, but the key is lost in the darkness of God’s silence. Let us light all the lights, let us call all the names, to find the key.”

Traditions, including our own, comingle in this place, as we – in our own clumsy way – attempt to light the lights and find the key. We are compelled to sift through the great impact of tradition in order to appreciate its sacred qualities and recognize what tradition unlocks for us within.

‘Tradition’ – sacred though it may be – is informed, even defined, by context. Many of you have asked me to offer reflections on my recent trip to the Holy Land, and one of the issues that I spent time wrestling with as I wrote a blog of my experience was the juxtaposition of tradition and reality.

"To walk where Jesus walked" was a phrase I heard many times before my arrival in Israel.

"To walk where Jesus walked" is the reason given by so many when asked why they go to the Holy Land.

"To walk where Jesus walked" has been the *tradition* of the pilgrim for hundreds of years; but the *tradition* doesn't necessarily make it a *reality*.

With every stop on our pilgrimage, the guides began with very similar sounding words (no matter which site we were visiting): "Tradition tells us that this is the place where..." "Locals believe this is the site where..." "We believe this is somewhere near the place where..."

The attempt “to walk where Jesus walked...” inevitably leads the pilgrim to ask: “Now wait a second, where exactly *did* Jesus walk?” There didn't seem to be a lot of places we could answer with any real certainty.

So, where *did* Jesus walk? Where *were* the disciples called from their boats? Where were the palms held high and the Hosannas shouted? Where did other hinge moments of Biblical narrative take place? If we don't know, then how can generations of pilgrims venerate these Holy places?

One day, early in our time in Israel, two of our stops included the Basilica of the Annunciation, and the Basilica of the Wedding at Cana (or the Basilica of the First Miracle). While neither location was full of people (thanks to the season we happened to be traveling in), both were filled with awe, wonder, and reverence. At the grotto where tradition tells us the angel's annunciation to Mary occurred, there was a monk pressed against the barrier, genuflecting, and reaching his hands - palms out - toward the stone cave. Two women sat weeping and holding each other. Three teenagers ran their fingers over rosaries as their lips moved in unison. At the site where the Wedding in Cana is honored, couples renewed their wedding vows and sang love songs to each other. We witnessed the celebratory act of a Japanese couple recommitting themselves to each other as members of their faith community joined hands in a circle around them.

In both places a reverent love was tangible; it was *real*.

Is the sacred experience muted or dulled if we don't *really know* if these events happened in exactly these locations? Is pilgrimage hindered; is our own entry into Jerusalem to our community's shouts of Hosanna muted if we don't actually walk where Jesus walked?

Tradition offers us what reality can't. These are Holy sites. To be "Holy" means to be 'set apart.' We bring our own awe and we bring our own wonder, and these feelings commingle with the awe and wonder of all those who have come before. Our prayers echo their prayers; our tears mix with their tears; our feet fall in *their* footsteps – we walk where *they* walked. These places are Holy because we make them Holy by setting them apart and by being fully present to them.

In so doing, *tradition* becomes the *sacred* reality.

"To walk where Jesus walked" means a whole lot more than traversing the countryside along Galilee... In a way, we do walk where Jesus walked when we walk knowing Jesus' Spirit is present within us when we respond to his call to act in love. So we raise our own voices to shouts of "Hosanna!" and these cries join together with those who have cried out before us.

Hosanna! Hosanna!

But if tradition is defined by context, what does this act mean for us today?

Christians have altered 'hosanna's' original meaning. It has become a form of adoration and praise, synonymous with 'hallelujah.' But when the early Jewish people offered hosannas during the festivals of Passover and Sukkot – holding their own palm branches aloft – they were pleas for help: "Hosanna! *Save us!*"

Perhaps to honor both traditions, we might weave these two understandings together, and experience shouts of hosanna not exclusively as pleas, and not exclusively as praise, but combined together as an acknowledgment and affirmation of help: "Hosanna! You *are* our help! Hosanna! You *are* our salvation!"

Yet, even as we join our voices together in this acknowledgment of help, in this prayer of affirmation, the burden falls on us to act.

A quote attributed to St. Teresa of Avila offers:

Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.

You could say our tradition is to recognize how God acts within and through us. Our hosannas can be interpreted as our acknowledgement and affirmation of the help we offer one another – of God working through each of us.

To the choir we say, “Hosanna, loud hosanna, you are our help! You lift our hearts in song, and fill this sanctuary with your voices. You volunteer your time and through your concerts, you call attention to important issues in and around our community. Hosanna to you!”

“Vicky, hosanna, loud hosanna, you are our help! By bringing yourself completely to this work, we all experience it as a vibrant ministry in the life of this church. Both those who hear the choral anthems and concerts, and those who sing in them, are lifted up by your care and oversight. Hosanna to you!”

“Michelle, hosanna, loud hosanna, you are our help! With the postlude and prelude, you give our worship form. You play or accompany every piece of music that comes between. You give our time together vibrancy and flow. This space becomes sacred at the movement of your fingertips, your energy. Hosanna to you!”

“Bob, hosanna, loud hosanna, you are our help! In staff meeting we joke and say that you’re the best pastor among us, and yet we should say: ‘You are the best pastor TO us.’ You give selflessly, and our experience of this community is possible because of the work you do. Hosanna to you!”

“Pastoral team, hosanna, loud hosanna, you are our help! David and Cathy, your prayers give words when our own hearts cannot make sense of our needs. Your reflections bring wholeness when our spirits suffer fracture. Hosanna to you!”

“Tim, hosanna, loud hosanna, you are our help! You have brought life and healing to so many of us. Thanks to you, we know that when we hear God’s voice – in any of its forms – we should not – we WILL not harden our hearts. You are our help; you softener of hearts. Hosanna to you!”

“Hosanna to you, the congregation; hosanna to all of you, who bring yourselves fully to this space. Without your presence in this sanctuary, it would be an empty room of void promises and silenced prayers. You are not only the congregation that gathers to be led in worship, but you are a community of ministers who go out into the world and give of yourselves in ways we may never know about, but ways we are filled with gratitude for. Hosanna to you! You are our help! You are one another’s help! You are the world’s help!”

Hosanna to all of you. The palms we raise in thanksgiving to you acknowledge the help you offer. They affirm the salvation you bring to this community and to the city that surrounds it.

You are our help. You are our experience of salvation.

This is our tradition. We walk along this pilgrim path and enter the gates of this sanctuary to shouts of “Hosanna, loud hosanna,” because of all of you.

May that continue to be so.