



How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right-hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

Psalm 137



The medieval pilgrims who traveled to Jerusalem sewed the emblem of the palm on their cloaks. In similar fashion they sewed the image of keys if they were headed to Rome and scallop shell if they were headed to Santiago de Compostela. The image would tell people of their intended destination. Mostly it would convey that they are not walking to work, or for business, or family; they were walking unto God.

A pilgrimage is walking unto God.

Fortunately, we are going to fly. The walk to Israel for us would be quite arduous and long.

Many pilgrims in many places crawl on their knees to the sought-for shrine of devotion. We will be bussed from place to place.

There will be walking each day, but the pace is easy and the distances are short. The longest walk we will make will be from the top of the Mount of Olives to the Lion's Gate into Jerusalem. This is the last part of the path Jesus walked as a pilgrim. It will not be our last, but it will be hilly.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem days before his arrest, conviction, and death, his friends and disciples had no idea what would happen. Our itinerary will be set.

On our pilgrim walk where Jesus walked, we will not have palms sewn on our jackets. We will have name badges. Unlike the lonely pilgrim of the past we will be in the midst of many others.

It is not hard to pick out the tourists in Israel. There is a slow-moving glom headed by a guide who speaks clearly for all to hear. In Jerusalem you will walk the Via de la Rosa which is the path of Jesus from his trial before Pilate unto the place of his crucifixion. There will be a guide and a commentary.

Again, there will be many others with you. As you walk, the chances are you will start to feel a strange tension, anxiety even. You will be safe, but the sense of something swirling around you will be unlike anything you have experienced before. The pictures I placed above are the reason for this tension.

The first photo above is the ceiling of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the last stop of the path. Here you will encounter a swirl of people and images. Later in our reflections, we will explore the Holy Sepulchre in detail.

In the same way we will explore the second image from Jerusalem, the Wailing Wall. This is the most sacred site for Jews. Below this image is the very famous Dome on the Rock. Although not the holiest site for Muslims, it is in the top three (Mecca and Medina being the first two).

When you walk Jerusalem, you enter the tension of these three images. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is the most sacred site of Christians. It is a stone's throw from the Wailing Wall. The Dome on the Rock is built directly above the Wailing Wall. That is a lot of geography to take in at once, but such is the purpose of these devotions. Here we are taking time to digest the insights and information so we can be ready for what is revealed to us as pilgrims.

The information here is to help prepare you for the profound tension that is the Old City of Jerusalem. Three religions— billions of people— all see these few square miles as the most important place on earth. Jerusalem is sacred; it is a religious heritage and identity. This place is very important. Important to most of the world.

Although the three religions of the Book hold much in common, it is fair to say these three religions do not always get along, let alone, play nice.

The pilgrim coming to Jerusalem— the pilgrim unprepared for this tension, the swirl of global prayers commingled in one spot— is easily lost. Lost not only in the anxiety and tension, but also physically lost because the Old City is a warren of alleyways and twists and turns and markets that all start to blend. These three places (the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rock, and the Wailing Wall), these three are the anchors.

The Dome of the Rock, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Wailing Wall are a foundation of faith, a kind of bedrock of spiritual geography. And then, each one is ephemeral, obtuse, a fleeting moment. Mostly, each are a moment to open your heart.

If you prepare yourself, you are less likely to get lost in the swirl— the tension between bedrock and wind. It is easy to get lost here. So much happening; so much contradiction. There is no guarantee that preparation will make all of this make sense. Yet, making your heart ready will provide one key aid. If we are lost before we enter these places, then we cannot ponder and receive the blessing of a revelation.

In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre we enter into the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection. Here we are to ponder what it means for God to "give us his only son." At the Wailing Wall we are brought into the great mystery of God's choosing. God chose to call Abraham; chose to call Isaac; chose to call Jacob. What does this call mean today? This is the pulsating question at the wall. At the Dome of the Rock we encounter the invisibility, the otherness of God. The transcendent God who cannot be depicted. The Dome begs the question: is the God you determine really God?

These are great mysteries. Each is a blessing. The prepared, open heart is ready for a blessing.

To walk as a pilgrim in Jerusalem is to wade into the deep waters of these three places. Consider this today: am I ready to listen to the voice of God and what will be revealed to me?

Information needs no such preparation. Insights about life and ourselves can be passed back and forth without any need to pause and prepare ourselves. Yet, as the hymn asks, “how is it that the Christ of glory died for me?” This question needs careful and patient preparation in order to hear an answer? Another hymn, “Come, O Come Immanuel.” Are we ready to pray this prayer at the Wailing Wall? Do we know what it means to bid “The Holy One” to come near to us, to rescue us?

One question I was not prepared to ask in Jerusalem was the question of God’s absence. I knew God’s presence, but what if God was not as near as I thought?

I found this question years later in Spain. It came to me as I walked through a mosque become cathedral in Seville. The question I heard was this: will you lay aside your confidence about God so to receive the voice of humility? Is your certainty about God true or something of your making?

When I walked into the mosque in Seville what I could see is a place that is unfurnished; there is no focal point save the heart bent in prayer. In Spain I could see Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem at the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa, there is a question to ask: are you listening for your voice or God’s?

This is a good question for pilgrims. But it takes a while to get ready to hear it.

Take some time to today to be quiet with the pictures above. Let them sink in, be with you, speak to you. Don’t try to figure them out. Pray to the Holy Spirit: I believe, help my unbelief; I can see, help my blindness; I can hear, help me to listen. Amen.