Pilgrimage Prayer
Psalm 121; Luke 22:39-42; 44

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. **40** When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial."[a] **41** Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, **42** "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." In his anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]][a]

If you are visiting with us this morning, the service is a bit unusual. I have open heart surgery on Tuesday, so we will pray for me at the end of the service, not because I'm so special, but because I'm so like everyone in the congregation. You can be an expert at walking other people through tragedy and death, but that doesn't mean that you will be exempt from anxiety when you face your trial. Rationally, I've worked this on through. I'm squared away. But our lives are also subconscious and pre-rational, and it is here that most of our anxiety resides and operates. So, I share a reflection today on when we pray for big stuff in our lives, stuff that doesn't easily change.

I'll be out for a month or more, so I've been handling a lot of details. But one thing I haven't thought about much is how we will do it when I'm out. It is a team that leads our congregation. I've been blessed with outstanding colleagues who will keep us moving in my absence. My thanks to Rev. Julie, to Mark, to Matt, to Ali, to Brenda, and to Barry for stepping

up. At moments like this, I tap into a deeper gratitude for things that are routine the rest of the year. Excellence, character, harmony. I don't take them for granted. And stop over to say "hi" to Brenda in the next month. She may be a little lonely.

If you live long enough, you start to realize that, at best, we get to be self-directed about 75% of our lives. But 25% of the time, we just have to respond, to bounce back from something that just about does us in. When really bad stuff happens, all of our plans seem weak and insubstantial, compared to this huge challenge that we are not up to facing.

I was playing golf with a guy a few years ago when someone mentioned that I was a Minister to him. They said, 'he goes to Mass every morning.' I looked over at him and he remarked, "It is a good way to center myself at the start of the day". That is the type of thing people say to Priests, so I didn't think much about it.

A few weeks go by, and I see him again. Just before we part, he says, "I wonder if you'd pray for my wife. She's having a procedure tomorrow." I ask him her name and what hospital she is at. He names a top cancer

hospital in the world and tells me the name of the procedure. He turns to walk away.

Because of being around cancer long enough, I realize in a minute that his wife has a life-threatening disease, the kind where you have to suspend long-term planning. They have children, some of them grown. He's been married a long time. He probably has a great marriage.

I suddenly see this guy waking up each morning, going to Mass before he heads to the gym, on his knees, day after day, asking God to heal his wife, thinking about her because he loves her, and he would do anything to make her better, really anything, take the illness himself if he could. Just heal her, God, and help the doctors find her a cure. Please… Just please.

You find yourself in a position of praying with real intensity, partly because you have no other options, partly because you are suddenly obsessed with changing reality around this one immediate challenge that is threatening to swamp you and your family.

You suddenly find yourself in need of a pilgrimage faith, not the regular faith of your parish back home. You are ready to go to some place

holy and take this one petition of your heart and allow it to be transformed. You are opening yourself to becoming transformed.

The pilgrimage best known to Christians goes to Jerusalem. It used to be that you took a boat from Europe that ended in Acco in Israel, just east of Tel Aviv. From there, it is about a 12-mile hike to the base of the mountain that leads up to Jerusalem.

These days, not so many people make the full 12-mile hike, but almost all of the spiritual pilgrims to Jerusalem gather at the bottom of the Mountain. “I lift mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my strength,” says Psalm 121. That is because Jerusalem is on top of a mountain. Until recently, the whole side of the mountain going up was covered in vineyards and olive orchards. There are monasteries that are placed along this path, monasteries that are hundreds of years old, because people have been making this pilgrimage for thousands of years.

And you cannot believe how many people there are on a given day. It is very sobering. They come, literally, from all over the world. Not many of them speak English. And there are a surprising number of women from

Russia, from the Ukraine, peasants who have not been to college like your urbane friends back home.

They carry prayer beads that they work over and over. They bring scarves, dolls, or other items they want blessed, which they will carry back home and give to their loved ones in the hope that a miracle will take place. They are more pious than my great-grandmother, and they are so poor that you wonder how in the world they scratched together the money to make this grand journey and how in the world they even had the wherewithal to get here to begin with. And they are tough. They know deprivation. They are acquainted with pain. And they are determined. They have resolve. And they will hike.

The road up to Jerusalem wends higher and higher and higher. It switches back, and the climb takes half of the day. For over half of the year, the trip is very hot, up, up, and up. There are a few places, mercifully, where water runs from a spigot.

And then you suddenly find yourself on the outer walls of the ancient city, and the wind is whipping around the corner. Suddenly, you are cold,

even on a hot day, like entering God's domain makes you nervous at the last moment… And perhaps it should.

And you stand there for a moment, looking back on this huge throng of people that has formed this river of prayer that extends for a few miles back down the mountainside. And you realize that people have been coming like this day after day for 2000 years, over 730,300 days from all over the world. They come bearing the deepest concerns of their hearts. They come hoping against hope for a miracle.

And you stand there for a minute, just taking it all in. Already, you have been blessed with one of the main things you needed, even though you didn't know you needed it: **perspective**. You can place yourself, your tiny little self in the midst of this huge river of humanity that began so long ago, you couldn't even see that far if you wanted to. And you just know that it will extend so far in the future, you cannot really even conceive of it. You are not an exception. Right now, you don't stand out in any way.

You know, when the millions of pilgrims descend on Mecca for the beginning of the Hajj, the very first thing they do is shave their heads, bathe,

and then wrap themselves in a simple burial shroud, a white cloth you wrap around your body. It is a visceral reminder that you are mortal, like all humans are mortal, that you will not escape those things that we all have to go through, whether we want to or not.

So it seems right that when you actually get to Jerusalem, you walk down the Via Dolorosa that Jesus walked down carrying his cross to Golgotha, and you are wandering down these cramped, narrow warrens that have no grand boulevard procession to them.

It seems right that you enter into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, where Jesus died and was buried, that it is cramped, overfilled with people from all over the world, filled with incense from the continuous Masses that are performed in Ancient Greek, in Latin, in Slavonic Russian, in Syriac… in languages so old that no one actually speaks them anymore.

It seems right that you wend your way through this ancient church, pressed from someone from Nigeria in front of you, someone from the Philippines behind you, someone from Brazil at your side. It seems right that you have to bend down to fit into the prayer chamber over the place where

Jesus died, and you have just a moment to make your petition, speak your vow, and respectfully move on.

God loves you. The divine image rests upon you. And there are millions and millions of other people that God must attend to as well. And they have come from before the dawn til late into the night, each and every day, week after week, year after year, for thousands of years.

And you walk up to the city walls, and you climb up those medieval ramparts and look out over what is below, with the wind in your face, blowing up the mountainside. And you feel what Abraham felt 3,5000 years ago, before there was ever a city, when he first came here with his son Isaac, the first recorded pilgrim to this place.

Perhaps you decide to make a change in your life, to tackle something that is really difficult for you (like a character defect). Perhaps you decide to give up a pleasure, like drinking wonderful wine, because every time that you have to go through the pain that comes from not doing something you love, you remember what your spouse is not able to enjoy right now, and you connect with their pain and privation.

And you stop, and you pray for them, for God's blessing in their life, and you ask God to fill you with genuine spiritual purpose. You want to be spiritually stronger for them and you know like hell that you need to be stronger spiritually for yourself.

We aren't binding the Almighty. We can't bind the Almighty. But we know we want to strengthen our spiritual capacity for compassion. We know we need to be strong for the people around us that we love, the ones we have to take care of.

And we know that we have to live without all of the answers; we have to live in a world of unknowing. We can't control the outcomes. We can only focus on ourselves. We can only concentrate the spiritual force. That is what love does for each other.

And sometimes you come back changed, not just for a while, but for good. I'm always struck by the people who return from the Hajj to their hometowns changed. They had a whole career, a developed identity, before they went to Mecca, and they came back as people who would live the rest of their lives principally in the spiritual realm. Usually, they are of

retirement age. They know that there is not an endless amount of future they can explore. And through this quest, they have come to see what is most important in their lives, forming their spiritual character, growing in their spiritual lives.

I wish you could avoid pain and loss in this world. But you cannot. I hope for you an awakening when real difficulty tracks you down. I hope you grow in character as the challenges come at you. I hope that you find the spiritual zone and concentrate on your spiritual purpose in your being as you become a channel of God's compassion towards those that you love and those that you are responsible for. I hope for you clarity as to what is most important for you in the time that you have left. Your spiritual self is becoming more important in your life each and every year. You are evolving, and you sense that from time to time, late at night. It is not about becoming morally perfect, but your life is about letting your spiritual self, your transcendent self, come to predominate, to lead, to guide us towards compassion, towards strength of character, towards moral purpose that shines humane love around us. This you want to do. You want to show up

for others, with the best version of yourself, as frail and inconsistent as you might be day in and day out. Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened. Jesus promised us, “Come unto me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for the Spirit is gentle and humble, and you will find rest. For my yoke is loose, and my burden is light.” And may God bless you and keep you. For God is not done with you yet…. God is not done with you yet…. Amen.

As you go from this place, may God’s strong love surround you and nourish you with the courage of the Christ. Amen.