

All Roads Lead to Where We Stand  
*In the Labyrinth with Jesus and Moses*  
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Last summer while I was still living in Pittsburgh, I met with a friend to walk Jessica's Labyrinth at Chatham University – my alma mater. She had been going through a rough time and I suggested a labyrinth walk as a meditative, healing, and reflective exercise. As we stood at the starting brick of this lovely spiraling labyrinth, set into the grass in front of Berry Hall, I explained that there was only one way towards the center and one way out, so she didn't have to worry herself about which way to go. You cannot technically get lost, I assured her. All roads led to where we stood.

But she hesitated. The first step was the hardest, she admitted. How could she trust that the labyrinth wouldn't turn into a maze, as her life had done on more than one occasion - with a troubled child, a failed marriage, and job insecurity, among other challenges? So I went in first and she followed. In the center, we stood together for a while, quietly reflecting. She looked relaxed and renewed. "I'll lead us out," she said, her face brightened by hope. And I followed.

Have you ever walked a labyrinth? It's a wondrous thing. In mythology, the labyrinth was originally described as a "maze" meant to trap the dreaded Minotaur beast, but it evolved over centuries to denote a 16-circuit series of spirals that offer an unambiguous route. A labyrinth is not the most efficient route to get from point a to point b, but speed is not the point. Intention, patience, presence is the point.

As for the term, "an unambiguous route" — well, I'd say this is true on the surface...all roads do indeed, lead to wherever you stand in a labyrinth; and if you trust this, like my friend was able to do, you'll make it to the center and home again. That's not to say that within the simplicity of a labyrinth walk there are not challenges: moments of feeling lost, or feeling anxious, or wondering why it seems to be taking so long to make the journey; because there are. Emotionally and spiritually, it can feel like uncharted territory.

And because of the way the spirals are laid out, one cannot usually gauge how far you've progressed on the journey. All very symbolic of a human life, isn't it? Especially during this troubling and bewildering times.

You may wonder why I'm waxing homiletic about labyrinths (of all things) when we've landed at the crossroads of two major religious holy seasons featuring two of our most renowned religious wanderers, Jesus and Moses. Here's the connection. It seems to me that if we look at their sagas from a certain angle, as we will today, we might notice how their journeys resemble a labyrinth walk - in essence, as called prophets, there was only one way *in* and one way *out* for them, once they took up the charge.

Jesus could not deny Jerusalem; Moses could not circumvent the Exodus. All roads led to where they stood and they stepped into what some would call their destinies; others would say, their “callings.” For no matter how they might have wanted to flee or change course, there are no escape hatches for prophets, or one might add, for any seeker committed to progressing along a spiritual path in the real world.

This being Palm Sunday, let's begin with the Passion story, and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem 2000 plus years ago. Although all four New Testament Gospels recount the story, only Luke interrupts the narrative to give us something uniquely profound and powerful - Jesus looking out over Jerusalem and weeping. This is a very human, Everyman Jesus. The humanitarian Jesus who resonates for Unitarian Universalists.

“In his 1994 book, **The Gospel According to Jesus Christ**, the Nobel Prize winning writer Jose Saramago tells an imagined story of just such a Jesus who tries to resist God's election. This Jesus is caught up in a divine drama that he accepts reluctantly. He recognizes that he can heal the sick, but is disturbed by the way people respond to miracle workers. The way they elevate him, “guru-ize” him, try to squeeze the humanity out of him.

He recognizes what his crucifixion and resurrection will come to mean for centuries of people — but he also foresees the history of crusades, pogroms, inquisitions, and religious wars that will be launched under the banner of his cross — and he wants to know why he, a simple man, is meant to die for all of this to come to pass. In a way, this book is also a meditation on the road *not taken*: What if Jesus had not gone to Jerusalem? What then? No Christianity, I suppose. But, then, I would venture a guess that something like it would have emerged anyway...people are people and they will make their Gods and their doctrines.

But we know this does not happen. Yes, he could have turned back from his perch on Mt. Olivet. He knew trouble was brewing in the city of David. But, of course, he doesn't turn back. It would have been totally out of character for him to turn back. To a hail of hosannas and the pageantry of waving palms, he rides down from the Mount of Olives, astride a donkey, bravely confronting the jealousy of the Pharisees and the oppression of the Roman Empire. It is his unavoidable date with destiny, his walk in the labyrinth of his calling — one way in and one way out.

If you're familiar with this narrative, then you may also know that Jesus, the world's first reformed, radical Jewish Rabbi, had gone to Jerusalem, at least partly, to celebrate Passover with his disciples. His Last Supper, commemorated on Maundy Thursday, was a Passover Seder (which this year will take place on April 8<sup>th</sup> for Jews the world over—even remotely, on Zoom video chat).

Passover, or *Pesach*, is one of the oldest of Jewish festivals, honoring the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. The Golden Calf, the ten plagues, Mt. Sinai -- it's the gripping yarn of Moses leading his people away from bondage and back to their Promised Land. When we examine the details, we find that this drama also includes generations of innocents who were murdered and tortured before the Exodus even began, and those who suffered and died on the way home. In the end, Moses can only gaze down upon the Holy Land from Mt. Nebo, and dies before his people have

even crossed over the River Jordan. One can imagine that he, too, wept on the mountaintop.

Technically, according to modern GPS, the Exodus journey could be completed in approximately 11 days, by the most efficient and navigable course. 11 days??? So, why 40 years? Some say it's because Moses wouldn't ask Miriam for directions! In truth, it's because of the Israelite's disobedience at Mt Sinai, building and worshiping golden calves, while Moses sat devoutly on the mountaintop waiting for the commandments to be etched in stone. Yahweh (their God) was justifiably angry and disappointed with his chosen people and as punishment, had them wander for 40 years until all who had sinned had died off, leaving only a new devoted generation to inherit the land of milk and honey, led by Joshua, not Moses.

Both Jesus and Moses were called into chosenness by Yahweh, and with that, called forth into the desert and into the wilderness. Yes, the Jews wandered for 40 years with Moses. But were they lost? It must have felt like an endless, pathless land. Yet, is it imaginable that they were actually walking a labyrinth, too...an unambiguous route, whether they knew it or not?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, when a future prophet is called, the answer is "Hineni," a Hebrew word meaning, "Here I am." Usually, the prophet is reluctant to be commissioned, so we often witness God calling over and over again until his message gets through! Luckily, the God of Hebrew Scripture had call waiting! "Hello, come in Moses, Samuel, Isaiah"...Oy!

This word, "Hineni," means not just "existing." It conveys so much more – being fully present, faithful, expectant and willing to engage and embark on the prophet's path - even into a wilderness wandering. When God called to Moses out of the burning bush, Moses answered, "Hineni. Here I am."

Unlike Moses, Jesus didn't rack up a lot of frequent wanderer points, unless we factor in the claim by some scholars that his "lost years" between the ages of 12-29 were spent in India and the Far East (which would account for the Buddhist-like quality of his aphorisms).

Otherwise, he stayed fairly close to home, the distance between Nazareth and Jerusalem, a mere 150 km. If you toss in the side trips here and there, to Bethany and such, he might have traversed a couple hundred miles in his three-year ministry. The number 40 plays out for Jesus too, though, given his own stint in the wilderness, facing temptations and the elements. Having established his path in the desert, Jesus went on to Galilee.

Why Galilee? For one thing, Jesus was at home there; it was his patch, having been brought up in Nazareth. Strategically, Galilee was ideal: populace, accessible, rebellious, the Galileans held a reputation for being eager, forward-looking, and receptive to change. Ultimately, it was to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy (9:1-2) and answer his own "Hineni" as a rebellious and idealistic Rabbi. More of Jesus' labyrinth walk, one might say, spiraling towards the center and out again in a dance of faith and mission.

In both stories, wanderers moved through the landscape within themselves and learned that they must endure this loneliness in order to find one another (just like us). This reminds me of a famous Southern gospel tune, with the lyric: "Jesus walked that

lonesome valley. He had to walk it by himself.” But that does not mean he was *alone* or that he was *lost*. On the contrary, an ever-expanding tribe typically accompanied him, and they found joy in wandering together, from self to tribe and back to self, and were changed by these shared journeys, just as we are.

In the words of our poetic reading earlier about the Exodus experience, Alla Renee Bozarth writes: “Some will find new friendship in unlikely faces, and old friends as faithful and true as a burning bush.” And yes, this was true of the Jews wandering in the wilderness, a tribe of seekers in a kind of personal solitude.

One of the most wonderful aspects of walking the labyrinth, especially with a group or a friend, is that you are alone, together, a tribe in personal solitude. Perhaps, that is how it feels to be here on Sundays when we gather or in worship these days on YouTube, together and apart with yourself and with others, in personal revelry and in community, on a spiraling journey; without a compass, perhaps, but not lost; a place where all roads lead to where you stand.

For us modern seekers, there is tremendous value in this type of wandering that enables risk within safety. Wandering which encourages our thoughts and feelings to meander while an “unambiguous route” guides us to the center. And these days, under lockdown at home during the coronavirus outbreak, we may feel like life is a frantic dash through a maze away from this threat to safety. Yet, we also now have conditions for an intentional and reassuring and reflective stroll in a virtual labyrinth. In fact, I’ve included resources on the Adult RE page on our website, for engaging in this spiritual practice at home, with some instructions and a printable finger labyrinth

You may have noticed these days that on Facebook and elsewhere, folks are posting profound and very honest musing and links for meditations and meaningful blogs, and they are mining some wonderful wit too. One Woman takes us on a faux hike in her home, including a waterfall in her shower, jungle amongst her houseplants and an incredible view from her kitchen countertop. Another said he was going to put a different wine in each room and call it a Napa winery tour (elsewhere for beer and a pub crawl) Another is planning their next vacation itinerary to Los Living Room, the Baja Bathroom, and the Kalahari Kitchen. Humor gets us through – but it is tough to be housebound when we are typically free to wander to connect face-to-face.

Yes, Solitude is nice, at time, and so is wanderlust. Yet, I can’t imagine that anyone would want to wander alone aimlessly forever like wretched Aharsueus, whose known also by the famed moniker, “the Wandering Jew.” A popular figure in European lore, Aharsueus was a mortal doomed to live forever. His legend, dated back to 1602, describes a Jew from Hamburg who joined the mob and taunted Jesus on the way to the Crucifixion. In token of his rejection, Jesus promised that he would remain alive until the Second Coming, when the Messiah would return from heaven to fulfill biblical prophecy. But he would wander alone.

Aharsueus’s tragic tale reminds us of the limitations of being a Lone Ranger, and the price we pay for putting self-interest over the community. It shines a light on the power of compassion and the scourge of callousness in the face of pain. It asks us to utter, “Hineni,” and locate ourselves in the wanderings of our lives.

In my view, the manna of personal growth does not rain from Heaven when we take the quickest route or train our eyes only on a predetermined destination. I would argue that, instead, it is essential to locate ourselves where we are on the journey in a

world we cannot ultimately control, step by step, as we move to the center of our own labyrinth, our own call.

One may ask: “Is there something I have forgotten; have I become disoriented wandeling around in my own life?” The answer is found in each footfall - “Hineni, here I am, and I’m bored. Hineni, here I am, and I’m inspired and motivated; Hineni, here I am and I am scared or sad or sick or feeling petulant, Hineni, here I am and I am stepping lively with joy in my heart, even around my living room.”

“Hineni, here I am and I’ve been looking at social media for three straight hours. Hineni, here I am, and I’m ready to retire. Hineni, here I am and I’m ready to face my addictions. Hineni, here I am, caring for the Earth; Hineni, here I am, ready to deploy my talents and energy to be a justice maker, a community builder, or a more loving parent or friend or partner.” “Hineni, step by step towards the center of the labyrinth and back out again, Hineni, even when the unambiguous route feels like its morphed into a maddening maze.” Stay the course. Hineni!

In our reading, Bozarth speaks truth to power, writing, “Some of you will be so changed by weathers and wanderings that even your closest friends will have to learn your features as though for the first time. Some of you will not change at all.” Yes, this is so. There may be people who are important fellow travelers on our journeys who don’t want us to get clear or grounded, because it threatens them or the status quo and they may get left behind. You may move out of dysfunction or addiction or codependence and into something healthier, your steps leaving footprints now boldly visible on the dusty path. In such cases, we have critical choices to make - keep moving towards the center of labyrinth, towards a promised land of authenticity, or step off, back to that place of stasis, perhaps a place of quiet misery or yearning.

Sometimes, the first step and the first Hineni is the hardest. In the spirit of Moses and of Jesus, and of my friend in the labyrinth, we can answer “Here I am” to both fear and courage, trusting that a way will open to the center of ourselves, as we remember that the Promised Land is not a destination; like a labyrinth, it’s a way of going.

For, as Don McLean reassures us in his song, *Crossroads*, which inspired the title for this sermon: “There is no need for turning back, because all roads lead to where we stand, and I believe we’ll walk them all, no matter what we may have planned. No matter what we may have planned.”

Blessings for the journey. Blessed be. Blessed We. Amen.

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