

Psalm Sunday Pilgrimage

A vigorous day of spirit and meditation in the Hudson River valley

On Palm Sunday, each year for nearly a century, it has been the tradition of hiking clubs to trek to Sunday church services mirroring the journey of Jesus into Jerusalem. For the Adirondack Mountain Club, it has been a pilgrimage up what is now the Harlem Valley Rail Trail to Saint John's in the Wilderness Church at Bash Bish Falls. For the Appalachian Mountain Club, it has been to hike the hills of Harriman before a communal service at Saint John's in the Wilderness Church near Lake Tiorati. In recent years, a new tradition has begun to celebrate our Hudson River heritage beginning the pilgrimage at Union Church in Pocantico Hills and concluding 12 miles away at the Mariandale labyrinth in Ossining. This trek overlooking the Hudson River shoreline is graced with a litany of historic, religious sites. Entitled "Psalm Sunday Pilgrimage" each participant shares verses from their favorite psalm. My own contribution from Psalm 19:1-4:

"The heavens declare the glory of God,
the vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork;
day discourses of it today,
night tonight hands on the knowledge.
No utterance at all, no speech,
no sound that anyone can hear;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their message to the ends of the worlds."



Union Church – Pocantico Hills

Beginning at Union Church in Pocantico Hills – one of six sites of Historic Hudson Valley (see HudsonValley.org) – hikers gather for the 11:00 a.m. service. "It is fitting," says Pastor Paul, "that as we celebrate our centenary this year, that we honor both our past heritage and encourage new traditions. Our worship community extends its hospitality to visitors, and for the hikers we welcome them to Sunday services, offer a place to gather, and not be overlooked provide a restroom."

Besides the eight stained glass windows of the nave, and a Matisse flower over the sanctuary at Union Church (see ucph.org), the most striking stained glass is the Chagall rendering of the Good Samaritan gracing the entire west wall. After church services, hiker Ingrid Stone remarked, "In *The Gospel of Nature* (1912), Hudson River author John Burroughs writes 'The nature lover is not looking for mere facts, but for meanings, something he can translate into terms of his own life.' For me, this Palm Sunday service, this sacred place, this pilgrimage is personally meaningful to me."

Pilgrim hikers also have the opportunity to attend concurrent Sunday services at the adjacent Church of Mary Magdalene (see ChurchOfTheMagdalene.org). When entering a church, I think of it as originally being an empty box filled with artifacts of faith significant to the parishioners at the time of its construction – just as an artist begins with an empty canvas and paints meaningful images, message, and mood. We enter a church, much like archeologists to decipher those expressions of faith. Here the stained glass windows portray women’s personal faith breaking societal barriers, and honoring Mother Mary portray the mysteries of the rosary.



Church of the Magdalene

The pilgrimage now takes afoot in earnest trudging through the mud and pre-vernal remnants of slushy snow in the Rockefeller State Park (see NYSparks.com/parks/59/details.aspx). Hot chocolate at the Stone Barn offers a reprieve from the cilice of slippery snow and the flagellum of a cold, pelting rain. A pilgrimage is comprised of prayer, meditation, and mortification – none are lacking this day.

Meandering along the carriage roads, guided by stone walls, we pass cattle pastures and deep woods until we reach the visitors center where typically an art exhibit is on display, and always a restroom is available. Deeper into the park, we follow the Pocantico River as it flows through field and forest until we reach the Old Croton Aqueduct (see Aqueduct.org).



**Pocantico River
Rockefeller State Park**

A visit to the Old Dutch Church in Tarrytown (see ODCfriends.org) is quite a contrast to the Pocantico Hills parishes: these windows are unadorned and the interior is vacuous. Whereas the two Pocantico Hills churches offer images for faithful memories and meditation, this sparse space intends no distraction from prayer – simply to be in a spiritual present and nothing more... and nothing less.

Returning to the Old Croton Aqueduct northbound we skirt the Rockwood Hall Preserve, pass the Scarborough train station, and encounter the many conical ventilators marking each mile. We pause at the Ossining weir bridge adjacent to the Ossining Heritage Area Visitor Center which hosts artifacts of Sing Sing Prison and the engineering marvel of the Old Croton Aqueduct. Throughout this walk, we take turns reading the psalms we brought this day: reciting the verses and sharing why we chose them.

Our final destination is the labyrinth on the grounds of the Mariandale Retreat Center in Ossining (see Mariandale.org). Like the predestined life, a labyrinth has only one circuitous course. Sauntering through the labyrinth towards its center, it is an opportunity for reflection, to pause in life, and to experience nature near-at-hand with all our senses. At the center we make our intention and receive our revelation. As we retrace our steps at a more brisk pace, it can be done with the utter peacefulness of no thought.



Mariandale Labyrinth

For those rigorous souls wanting to join this seven hour pilgrimage upcoming on March 29, contact Skip Doyle at OutdoorSkipper@gmail.com. A meaningful and memorable Psalm Sunday pilgrimage awaits.