

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
1 Advent Year A
November 27, 2016

Psalm 122 vs 1-2

- 1 I was glad when they said to me, *
 "Let us go to the house of the LORD."
2 Now our feet are standing *
 within your gates, O Jerusalem.

My feet were standing within the gates of Jerusalem twice while on my recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Each time I felt that gladness of impending peace and wholeness which I yearned for, and of which the psalmist speaks. Each time I entered the gates of Jerusalem the sun shone brightly, the air was clear, and the city was alive with merchants and customers streaming through the streets. As we walked past a street vendor, I smelled the freshly baked bread which we later learned to enjoy, with just a bit of Za'atar, an exotic spice of the region. The call to prayer beckoned Muslims forward, but rang in my heart as well, and I entered the Old City with a sense of veneration and prayer.

The first time I entered the city with a weary body, a mind clouded with distractions, a heart hurried and harried with the weight of experiencing something entirely new, and a soul rattling around trying to make sense of something incomprehensible. My state of exhaustion of heart, mind, body and soul was largely due to the long journey from Shippensburg to Tel Aviv, dominated by an overnight delay at the Newark airport, but I imagine many of us find that we walk through life with a fairly high level of mental, physical or spiritual exhaustion, finding ourselves drained from the regular and merciless demands of life, and now with the added pressure of getting ready for the holidays, we may be especially feeling the weight of the season upon our hearts. We may wonder how we can be so busy and yet so empty? We too may find ourselves wishing to walk within the gates of Jerusalem, whatever that may be for us, to feel the gladness of impending peace and wholeness.

A pilgrim in Jesus' time would have entered the city in much the same state as I did that first day, yearning also for wholeness and peace, but arriving with an exhausted body after a long and arduous journey, a mind distracted by the cacophony of sounds and unfamiliar people, and a soul weary and weighed down by a multitude of sins, carried for years in anticipation of this one moment of forgiveness, which was made possible only by standing within the gates of Jerusalem. For you see, the temple mediated not only God's presence, but God's forgiveness in first century Judaism. It was the only place of sacrifice and sacrifice was the means of forgiveness. According to temple theology, some sins could be forgiven and some kinds of impurities could be dealt with only through temple sacrifice. As the mediator of forgiveness and purification, the temple mediated access to God. To stand in the temple, purified and forgiven, was to stand in the

presence of God. This is what people yearned for. This is why there was joy in the psalmist's heart at even the anticipation of a pilgrimage to the house of the Lord. He would be purified, cleansed, released from his sins, and offered a peace to settle into his heart.

The last time I entered the city, I came with a body ready to receive all that the city would offer me early that Sunday morning, with a mind alert for noticing the nuances of the city in the light of dawn, with a heart reaching outward toward my fellow pilgrims and the woman asking for our prayers at one of the Stations of the Cross, with a soul experiencing a thrill of hope, a sense of expansion as I walked through the streets, bowing my head in prayer at each of the Stations of the Cross, and a leap toward a deeper faith as I walked through the holy city of Jerusalem. I met the city with an Advent heart, open, attentive, watchful, and ready to receive the revelation of God.

The first time I entered the gates of Jerusalem and journeyed on my way to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, that building which commemorates Golgotha, the location of Jesus' death and burial, I was bombarded with the chaos of the interior, the noisy crowds, the disrepair of the building, the handwritten and poorly scrawled sign directing us to the tomb of Jesus, the differently dressed deacons spewing incense into the musty air, seemingly in competition with each other, and the general unrest of groups of people, trying to make sense of something incomprehensible. With my own unfamiliarity of wearing a head scarf and trying to keep it in place in the midst of the bustling crowds, I snapped photographs, hoping the lens of the camera may detect the holy, which seemed to evade me. I entered the gates with a heart and mind distracted and exhausted and as a result, my heart cried out upon exiting the building, "Where was this God I had set aside this time to find?".

The pilgrim would have entered the gates of the temple, tossed his few coins into the basket to purchase the turtle doves for his sin-offering, and proceed through the absolution process until he was released, freed from his burdens, and his heart turned again toward God and peace settled over him.

The second time I entered the gates of Jerusalem and journeyed my way to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, my heart and soul were in a different place because they had journeyed deep within that mysterious place with God, when within each new day during the week between my visits, a brand-new insight had been revealed to me about the life and ministry of Jesus. I had waded in the Sea of Galilee, renewed my baptismal vows by the River Jordan, sat with the suffering of Jesus at Gethsemane, looked upon the promised land from Mt. Nebo, and saw the pools at Bethzatha where we were anointed and somehow made more whole, like the man who had sat by the pools for 38 years, waiting for Jesus to show up and heal him. I brought my Advent heart to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and this time rather than seeing a secular mess, I saw the Kingdom of God. It was still chaotic, but rather than being distracting and disorienting, I found it to be mysterious and filled with pilgrims each worshiping in the way that brought them closer to the reality of the God we all worship, and there was holiness in every corner and within everyone. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher hadn't changed that week. I had. I had prepared my heart to see God and God didn't disappoint me. Growing this spiritual alertness and readiness is our work during Advent, so we can see and be in the presence of God on every morning, and particularly so on Christmas

morning when we celebrate the in-breaking of God into our world in the form of a baby in a manger.

There are extra-ordinary circumstances which lift our hearts into Advent being. These can be moments when love surrounds us so that the only possible response is to let love break through, such as when we are sitting with loved ones under hospice care, or anticipating the birth of our child, or hearing our children sing, "Here I am Lord" in church and our hearts burst open. It can be easy to allow your heart to fall into that Advent stance of openness to the love of God, when it is so clearly right in front of you. These can also be moments when we are most afraid, when we have to be most vigilant to keep evil at bay, when we need to scour the horizon of our soul for God's presence just to keep our sanity. And then there are ordinary moments, when there doesn't seem to be much urgency around having an expectant heart, for life seems to move along on its own, without any intentionality of our own direction.

This is often the situation we find ourselves in and yet our gospel text this morning tells us that this state of readiness is essential at all times because we never know when and how Jesus will come again and we must be ready, or else we will miss it. Just like I missed the holiness on my first visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, we too can miss the in-breaking of God into our lives every day, unless we develop an Advent heart.

Matthew's apocalyptic text which we read this morning can be viewed in several different ways: first there are those who hold a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, looking for signs, anticipating the end of the world as we know it, and expecting the rapture to separate the righteous from the unrighteous, though Matthew's description of the people chosen or not has nothing to do with their righteous behavior but merely the state of readiness of heart. Or, one can look at these texts as indicating the Day of Judgement we will each encounter upon our earthly death and we can live in fear or hope that the balance sheet of righteousness will weigh on the better side. Or, we can see it as a symbolic code for God's invitation into the fullness of human life offered us through Christ, each moment. This last way of viewing these texts is actually the most challenging, for it places the responsibility upon us to ask ourselves each moment, "Am I living in the way I should be, ready to receive God, attentive to God's movement in my daily life, and trusting in God alone?"

As Christians, we stand at the gate of our own Jerusalem each time we peer into our own souls, into that holy city where God resides within us. The process of making our hearts ready to receive the holiness of Christmas is one of cleansing ourselves from distractions, purifying our souls from the darkness which creeps in occasionally, forgiving others and ourselves, and releasing our reliance upon ourselves. This is our Advent work, so that when we awake on Christmas morning, we will be ready to receive the Christ child into our lives, again and anew.