

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

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## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Psalm 122:1-9      *"The Peace Of Jerusalem"*

"Let's go to church!" How, down through the years, has that been greeted in your family? Groans of "do we have to?" Excuses of "all the other things I have to do today?" Psalm 122 begins with words that have appeared in hymns, chants and anthems down through the centuries: "I rejoiced with those who said to me 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'" After 50 years I can still hear the words and melody of the version in the Anglican Psalter that I sang as a choir boy in England: "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the LORD.'"

#### 1) *Joy in Worship*

Psalms 120-134, which are labeled "songs of ascent," arose from various original life-settings but were eventually gathered and sung by Israelite pilgrims on their way to one of the great festivals in Jerusalem. In Psalm 122, they have apparently arrived either at the gates of the city or of the Temple: "Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem." They are delighted to be there; the journey is over, and they celebrate the joys of being in the city and in "the house of the LORD."

They have come, as the Law required, to give thanks to the LORD for his goodness to Israel and to them as families and individuals. To Jerusalem "the tribes go up,

to praise the name of the LORD." So they find delight in gathering together to worship and to praise God. It is something that believers of every generation experience, and it remains as true in the NT era and in our day as it did almost 3000 years ago. It is good to come into the house of the Lord and to give him praise together.

If that is not a part of our experience, then we are missing something profoundly important in our "walk with God." Communal worship is at the very heart of faith. Indeed I would argue that worship is the one essential thing, the one central and powerful act, that drives everything else in the church. People who experience the presence of God in worship are the ones who are then moved, motivated, empowered, to take on all the other aspects of the life of faith: serving, teaching, working, giving, outreach, evangelism. You *can* do all these things without joyful participation in worship, but I believe that you will not last long in them if your spirit is not constantly uplifted, refilled, inspired, by meeting God in worship. People who truly worship become so aware of the reality of God that they are able to do many things they could never otherwise imagine doing.

#### 2) *Unity In Fellowship*

But the pilgrims who composed or sang this Psalm found things other than joyful worship in Jerusalem. The structure of the city itself, and its atmosphere, brought home vividly to them the unity of the nation. They were separate and distinct tribes – Benjamin, Judah, Ephraim, Simeon - but when they came to Jerusalem, they were just Israel. That is the power of great architecture, of buildings and streets and parks and monuments, to unite people by giving them a vision of something greater than themselves. Who can visit Washington D.C. and stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and gaze down the Mall at the dome of Congress, and not feel more like an American? Who can enter a gothic cathedral and not feel more a part of a universal and historic Christianity?

Jerusalem was meant to be, and at its best functioned as, a place of unity, of harmony, of security. It was a meeting place, a city of refuge, the home of “the house of God,” and it was wonderful just to be there. In those moments, it fulfilled its name: “Jerusalem,” city of peace, house of *shalom*. At its best, the Church of Jesus Christ does the same thing for its gathered people. We discover a unity, a security, a sense of identity that we do not have when we are alone. At its best, the Church teaches us by experience the theological truth that God is a communal God in himself and in his relationships; that he is calling out a *people* for himself – to be sure, calling them one by one, but calling them into community. If we do not sense the value and importance of Christian community, then again we are missing something vital in the life of faith.

The city reminded the pilgrims of something else: it was the place of government, the place of law and justice. Here were “the thrones of David,” the palaces where kings held council. Here laws were made and justice was administered. Some pilgrims in

fact probably brought legal issues and disputes with them to be decided in Jerusalem. But the city reminded them of the blessings of order and justice that were God’s gifts to Israel. Again, nothing has changed. There is a reason that Court buildings are large and impressive; they remind us that the law is something greater than we are, that our private likes and dislikes and actions have to be subject to the greater good of the community, that law is one of God’s gifts, and like all of them, should be administered rightly.

Legislation that meets the common good, and a judicial system that applies the law without prejudice, are fundamental to what make a good and civil society. They are God’s gifts. When they are done poorly, or abused, God is offended. Read any of the prophets of ancient Israel, and hear them denounce corrupt judges, bribe-taking officials, cheating merchants. Dishonesty and self-indulgence by the rich and powerful, exploitation of the poor and needy, brought down the wrath of God on his people Israel and sent them into Exile. You do not have to wonder why some preachers make a living from denouncing what is wrong in our supposedly “Christian nation.”

### 3) *Prayer for Peace*

But here is an intriguing thing about the Psalmist and pilgrim of Psalm 122. He does not denounce what is wrong in Jerusalem, he prays that the city will be right and good.

He prays for “the peace of Jerusalem.” He has his reasons for doing so – for the sake of his “brothers and friends” - and he says he is praying “for the sake of the house of the LORD our God.” Why does he pray for the city? Because he knows that the welfare of his family and friends, his fellow pilgrims and people from other tribes, will benefit

from the peace, the security and the prosperity of Jerusalem.

Years later, the Jewish exiles in Babylon had to relearn the same lesson, when the prophet Jeremiah was called to send them a message from the LORD: "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for if it prospers, you too will prosper... build houses and settle down; plant gardens, marry and have sons and daughters..." (Jeremiah 29:5-7).

Why pray for the city? Because the welfare of all its citizens is linked; if the city is secure and prosperous and peaceful, then all its people can flourish. If the city is threatened from without by enemies, and torn from within by social unrest, then very few people will flourish - and they will probably do so unjustly at the expense of others. So pray for Jerusalem to truly be "the city of peace," and for every other world city to become the refuge, the secure place, the home of peace and prosperity that is God's design for cities.

If you have trouble believing that is possible, and still cherish some "frontier spirit" or a Thoreau-like or Rousseau-like desire to "get back to a simple life," read Revelation 21 and see God' vision of "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." Or read the NT book of Hebrews, which says Christians have come to "the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God... to thousands upon thousands in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven." If you think cities are a demonic modern invention, read Luke 19 and see how Jesus wept as he entered Jerusalem and lamented: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if you had only known what would bring you peace, but you did not recognize the day of God's visitation to you." (Luke 19:41).

Should we still pray for the city? Indeed! Should we still pray for the peace of Jerusalem? You bet! Because the peace, the security, the prosperity of all of us hang on the peace, the security and the prosperity of Jerusalem. While Jews, Christians and Muslims all hold it as a place of sacred memory; while enmity between their most radical followers splashes blood all over the Middle East, while explosions in Beirut and Baghdad cause windows to shake in Washington, we should all pray for peace for Jerusalem, peace among all those who call themselves the people of God, the people of the Book, the people who are sure that God is good and God is great.

The Psalmist prays for two things for Jerusalem: in Hebrew *shalom* and *shalah*: peace and security/prosperity. He does it for the sake of his family and friends and fellow pilgrims, and also for "the sake of the house of the LORD." Nobody can worship in joy and fellowship if they are afraid of being bombed. The gospel of peace with God cannot spread in a world at war, where chaos and darkness, violence and hunger are people's daily experiences; where just staying alive (while crying out to God for safety) is all that is left of life.

What do you pray for? What do we rejoice in? What do we experience of God in the company of his gathered Church? If for Christians the Church of Jesus Christ has replaced the city of Jerusalem and its Temple, what do we pray for? Do we "seek its good"? Do we pray for other people and other churches in other places? Or do we think of them as rivals? Does it matter to you if your neighbor worships at the Baptist Church or the Methodist Church or the Lutheran Church or the Roman Catholic Church? Do you ever pray for other churches, for their people, their ministries, their pastors?

Do you ever pray for the “city” of Wading River? Or Shoreham? They need it! Do you pray for the people who are called to govern the Towns of Riverhead and Brookhaven? They certainly need it! Do you ever pray for the executives elected to govern Suffolk and Nassau Counties? The Mayor of New York City? The Governor of New York State? The President of the United States? I hope you understand that such prayer is what God commends and commands, that it has nothing to do with the personalities or the political parties or the policies of the present incumbents; that we are not asking God to decide elections in our favor!

We are praying for the *shalom* and the *shalah* of the communities in which we all live, recognizing we are all in this together, that enemies without and strife within affect all of us, that the worship of God and the spread of the gospel and the service of others and the teaching of children cannot go forward rightly when communities are under threat or torn apart by strife.

Pray for the pastors, pray for the people in local and state government, pray for Mr. Bush and his advisors; pray that we may experience the peace, the security and the prosperity that God has for us. Then we can join in joyful worship, and appreciate the unity and the stability that being together brings us, and become people who say “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the LORD’.”

Let us pray...