

Advent 1, Year A, 2013
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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A few Sundays ago
I asked everyone at church to fill in a survey
on whether,
after three years of sermons on the Old Testament readings,
and three years of sermons on the New Testament readings,
you'd prefer the sermons over the next three year cycle
to be on the psalms
or the gospels.

And the results of the survey
were very interesting.
At one service, people almost unanimously
wanted to have sermons on the psalms.
At the other, the majority wanted the gospels.
Some people wanted both, or half and half.
But even more interesting were the comments:
One person said either, depending on the context.
One person said, please choose the reading we need to understand the most or that is difficult to
understand.
One said Psalms would be amazing.
One said Psalms with a focus on where they are echoed in other places in Scripture.

And then came the hard decision,
weighing up the survey results
and the comments,
along with the responsibility I am given by the bishop and the Book of Common Prayer
to "nourish Christ's people from the
riches of his grace, and strengthen them to glorify God in this
life and in the life to come"
and the way in which the vestry has discerned that God is calling us
to grow in faith through scripture and prayer,
and what has been going on in our parish family.

So I made the decision
that I will mostly preach on the psalms
at least for now,
but where possible
I'll reflect on the ways the psalms are used in the New Testament,
and particularly how they relate to the gospel for the day.

And I'll send out a link in This Week at St James
to a site that has sermons on the gospels.

Psalms
are part of our Scripture,
but they are a very distinct part.
Because what they are, fundamentally,
is prayers.
Sometimes prayers of individuals,
like King David;
sometimes prayers
of the whole community.
Sometimes
they were used in public worship
and even tied to particular ceremonies and celebrations;
sometimes
they were used mostly
in private prayer.
Some psalms
date back over three thousand years,
to King David, and even beyond, to Moses;
others were likely written
a mere three hundred years
before the birth of Christ.
And yet, as we read them,
they feel very contemporary.
Because the people who wrote the psalms,
even though they lives very different lives from ours,
were people just like us,
with the same thoughts and feelings,
hopes, doubts, and celebrations.
They found themselves in the same sorts of situations that we do,
and had the same feelings of ,
despair, grief, disbelief, fulfillment, and happiness.
And of course, they trusted in the same God that we do.

Some of the psalms
are thanksgivings, like Psalm 100,
“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.”
others are psalms of trust,
like Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd.”
There are Psalms of lament, like Psalm 22,
“My God, my God Why have you forsaken me?”

But all of them offer the same wisdom to us:
How can we speak to God?

Today
we read together
Psalm 122.
Traditionally
it was thought to be written by King David,
and it's one of fifteen psalms that are titled
"A song of ascents".

If you ever get the chance to visit Jerusalem
you'll know that it lies in the middle of a ridge of mountains
that runs right down the center of Israel.
To the west
are the plains that lead to the Mediterranean;
to the east,
the Jordan valley.
The mountain roads
tended to be dangerous,
so you most often approached it - and still do,
from the plains or the Jordan valley,
and either way, it's a long and winding climb,
2,490 feet above sea level, and of course, if you come from the east, down by the Dead Sea,
you have to add another 850 or so feet.
And even when you get there,
the city itself
is surrounded by deep valleys and dry riverbeds,
so there is a last climb
before you finally reach
the holy city,
the place
where God
was known to dwell.

It was a long journey,
and these fifteen psalms
helped while away the hours.
But they did more than that.
They helped prepare the pilgrims
to worship,
helped prepare them

to meet with God.

And so we come
to today's psalm.

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

And there are two things
that are striking in this psalm.
First the focus on Jerusalem
and second,
the excitement and anticipation.

First Jerusalem.
But it's not just
about going
to any old city.
Jerusalem
was at the heart of the identity
of the people
of God.

The first mention of it in Scripture
is back in the time of Abraham,
when he comes to one of those valleys
that surround the city of Jerusalem,
and the King comes out to meet him,
Melchizedek, king of Salem,
a priest of God,
and Melchizedek
brings out bread and wine
and blesses Abraham
in the name of God.

And you might remember
that Jesus is described in the New Testament
as being of the order of Melchizedek,
and already we have a hint
of where our psalm leads us,
not only to Jerusalem the city,
but Jerusalem

where our Savior
died
and rose again,
and demonstrated his rule
not only over a city,
but over life and death itself,
and to the new Jerusalem
where
the home of our king, Jesus,
and the New Jerusalem,
the holy city promised by God
at the end of all time,
where God will be at home
among mortals,
where God will dwell with us
and we will be his people,
and God will be with us;
and will wipe every tear from our eyes.
And there will be no temple,
because God's presence will be so real,
and the glory of God
will be its light.

Jerusalem,
city of God.

And you'll remember
that Jerusalem is the place
where King David built his city,
and where the ark of the covenant was brought,
the "footstool" of God's presence,
and the temple built around it.
And from then on, through its destruction in the year 70
it was the place of daily prayer,
and more importantly
the only place
where the offerings prescribed
in the Torah,
those precious first five books of the bible.
the only place
where the offerings and sacrifices
could be made.
And all adult men were expected

to visit and offer sacrifices,
particularly during the great festivals
of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot.

But Jesus
in chapter 24 of the gospel of Matthew,
just a few verses
before our reading today,
Jesus predicts
that the temple
will be
destroyed.
And he would rebuild it
in three days,
but as the gospel of John reminds us,
he was speaking
of his own body.
Jesus Christ
is the temple
of God.

And so for us as Christians,
it is not the temple in Jerusalem
that is the place of pilgrimage,
but the new temple,
of the risen Christ,
and the place of his presence.
Which is, of course, everywhere;
there is no place
where God is not,
but for us, the presence of Christ
is particularly experienced
in the Eucharist,
the bread that he called
his body
and the wine
that he called
his blood.

I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the Lord!”

So the first thing that strikes us about our psalm

is the focus on Jerusalem.
And the second
is the excitement and anticipation.
Finally
they are here,
approaching
Jerusalem,
approaching
the place of God.

They can't wait.

And it makes me think
about our own approach to God.
Through Christ
we all have direct access
to God.
We don't need a temple.
We don't need a pilgrimage.
We don't even have to get out of bed
to talk to God.
And I wonder,
Does our easy access
make us too familiar?

I sometimes wonder
if we sometimes forget
how amazing it is
that we can come here
and experience the presence of God,
not just in prayer
but in the tangible stuff
of bread and wine,
the body and blood
of our Savior.

On Wednesday evening
we had a great thanksgiving service,
led by the children who go to family bible study.
And they were so excited.
They read, they preached, they prayed.
And as we crowded around the altar,
the anticipation was palpable.

They were there
to meet with Christ.
And they want to know
when they can do it again.

It reminds me of the little boy in my last parish,
who as soon as he came in the church door,
would run up to the altar rail,
kneel down,
and put his hands out
to receive Jesus bread.

Today
is both the first Sunday in Advent
and the final Sunday
in our pledge campaign.
Our theme this year
has been
“Flourish
in faith.”

The tradition of New Year
in our culture
is one of making resolutions.
And here in the church,
as we begin our New Year,
we too
make our resolutions, resolutions
that will help us
to flourish in faith.

One resolution
is made explicit in our pledges:
They make tangible
our willingness
to come before God in faith,
with all that we have
and all that we are,
in thanksgiving for all that God has done.

But our psalm
invites us
to a second resolution.

A resolution
to come into God's presence
in worship,
to come excited,
anticipating
meeting God.

And so I invite you
this Advent season,
as we being our pilgrimage, not to Jerusalem
but to Bethlehem,
to make coming into the presence of God
a priority.
To make a pledge
to hold Sunday mornings
holy,
and as far as it is possible
to join the people of God in this place
week by week,
praising God
and meeting our Savior
in the breaking of bread
and the pouring of wine.

I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord!"