

Sermons at St. Paul's

A Wellspring of Spiritual Nourishment; A River of Service in Jesus' Name

**February 28, 2010, The Second Sunday of Lent
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In the name of God, Holy One, Holy Three, Amen.

Jerusalem. Jerusalem. I wonder, when I read these words of Jesus' longing, is Jerusalem a place or is it a metaphor? Earth and stone or a promise? My wonderings grew even stronger about three weeks ago, when I stood on the Mount of Olives and looked across the Kidron Valley at the city of Jerusalem. I may have been standing on the very spot where Jesus cried out towards Jerusalem "How I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!"

About half way down the Mount of Olives, between its summit and the Garden of Gethsemane, nearer the bottom, there is a church called Dominus Flevit. Many churches have occupied this site in the 2 millennia since our Lord stood there. The current church is a modern one, built in the year 1952. It is designed to resemble a tear drop—representing the tears Jesus shed over the city of God so long ago.

I think Jesus still sheds tears over Jerusalem, the modern city that is pulled and torn and uneasily shared by the descendents of Abraham—Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. All of them—all of us—are part of the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abram in Genesis 15. God took Abram (he wasn't called Abraham yet) outside of his tent and told him to look up into the sky and count the stars—if he was able. And God said to Abram, "So shall your descendents be." And so they are. The promise that God made to Abram outside his tent *has not stopped*.

We forget, I think, when we read Genesis in little bits like we heard this morning, that God meant the promise to Abram as a means of blessing all of creation. It was a promise for the whole world. *All* the nations of the earth were to be blessed by God's election of this *particular* man. Through the descendents of Abram, God planned to reconcile all of creation to God.

And even today we are the heirs of that promise—the Jewish people through Abraham's son Isaac; the Christian people through Jesus, the Son of God, himself a Jew; and the Muslim people through Abraham's son, Ishmael. All of us inherit God's promise to Abram: in you and through you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. We, all of us—and each of us—were included among those star-numbered descendents, and we, all of us—and each of us—are meant embody God's blessing—God's shalom, God's peace, God's salam. We are meant for fullness of life, wholeness, justice, well being and peace. When will we learn that we are meant to share that promise, and share it until the farthest corners of the earth are brought within walls of God's shalom?

I think that's what Jesus was on about in his heartfelt lament over Jerusalem. He longed for God's people to live in right relationship with God and with one another. Jesus saw Jerusalem as the symbol of human relationship. And Jesus wasn't alone in that, either. In the time between the story of Abraham in Genesis, and this story about Jesus in Luke's Gospel, the city of Jerusalem had become the symbol of God's promise, the embodiment of God's salvation.

And like God's promise to Abram, God's city, Jerusalem, was meant for the blessing and reconciliation of all of creation—a sign and beacon of God's reign of peace, justice and wholeness.

The psalmist (Ps 122) writes of Jerusalem as a city bound together to which all the tribes of the earth go up. Jerusalem holds peace within its walls and security within its towers. For Isaiah, Jerusalem was the sign of the covenant given to all the people, the light to which the nations flock, and the place from which God's teaching and justice shall go out (Isaiah 42; 51)

Even when the people of the promise were held captive in Babylon, Isaiah believed that ultimately, comfort would come *from Jerusalem*. Jerusalem would be restored, and with it the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation. God would dwell with God's people in the city and there would be social and economic justice and peace. Hear what God tells Isaiah:

I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime...They shall build houses and inhabit them, they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit, they shall not build and another inhabit they shall not plant and another eat...they shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord and their descendants as well. ...they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain says the Lord. (Isaiah 65:19-25)

And so of course it is to Jerusalem that Jesus ultimately turns with his own ministry of healing, wholeness and good news. His lament is that Jerusalem has not lived up to her calling to be the beacon of God's reign. In fact, when you read the Gospels closely, what brings Jesus into conflict with the authorities most of the time it is that he criticizes them for believing that they are the people of God all the while failing to exhibit justice, equity and peace in their relationships with one another.

Jesus warns that they cannot be God's *people* without *being* God's people. Your house is left to you he says—but God will not be in it. The temple will fall. And just as God's people have stoned the prophets sent to them to call them back into God's shalom, they will crucify the One who IS God's shalom. In the days before he enters Jerusalem for the last time, Jesus weeps over the city. He mourns the distortion of God's promise. For Jesus, I think, Jerusalem is both place *and* metaphor, both earth and stone *and* promise. And he weeps over both Jerusalems. And he gave his life for both.

I think that Antonio Barluzzi, the designer of the church of Dominus Flevit, where I stood thinking about all of this a few weeks ago, understood the dual nature of Jerusalem as well. He

understood that Jerusalem is both a place and a promise. Barluzzi gives the pilgrim who enters the church the physical experience of entering into the heart of Jesus' longing, and the heart of God's promise. The church's interior is dark. You sense that you've entered the dark place of Jesus' grief. But once your eyes adjust, a remarkable transformation begins to take place. In front of you is a simple marble altar, and behind the altar is a large Palladian window, that frames the city of Jerusalem. The window, with Jerusalem as its subject, is the source of light for the church. So it seems as if the light is coming from the city itself. You are drawn towards the light of the city—nations shall stream to the light of your dawning! God's promise, symbolized by the city of Jerusalem shines as a light in the darkness.

But there is more. Overlaid against the shining light of Jerusalem is a cross, a chalice and a host. In effect, the church's architecture proclaims that the cross of Christ, his body and blood given for the life of the world, is the answer to God's longing. Jerusalem, baptized with Christ's tears, is gathered under the protection of his cross, body and blood, as a mother hen gathers her chicks. Jesus himself restores and fulfills God's promise, beginning with Jerusalem. The pulpit hanging in Dominus Flevit is both prayer and promise: SALAM, SHALOM, PEACE.

Phoebe Griswold says of Jerusalem that "something wants to happen in there", on that earth and within those stones. As I stood in the church of Dominus Flevit, looking out towards the city for which Jesus wept, I began to understand what she meant. I believe in the promise of Jerusalem. I believe that the city of God is a physical place. I believe that if Abraham's descendents—Jews, Christians and Muslims—somehow find a way to live in peace, shalom, salam, it might just open the way for the world. Jerusalem, a shining beacon of what God has intended for God's children from the beginning.

In the meantime, I also believe, as I believed before I ever set foot on *that* earth and walked among *those* stones, that the peace, shalom and salam of Jerusalem is more than a place. It is a metaphor for the in-breaking of God's reign wherever and whenever it occurs. Even right here in Philadelphia, on *this* earth and within *these* stones. We, too, have been baptized by Christ's tears. We, too, are overlaid with Christ's cross, body and blood. We, too, are drawn close to God's heart, covered by God's maternal wings and held in life by God's life. And we, the descendents of Abram, as God's people have always been, are invited to act as God acts—out of love, not fear, out of self-giving, not self-protection, out of healing, not harming, out of life, not death. Quite simply, we are to *be* the people of God's promised shalom.

And when we *act* as God's people, we *become* ever more the people God created us to be. When we respond to God's prophets with repentance rather than stones, when we choose justice and peace, we *become* who we *are*: the descendents of Abram, shining like the stars in the night sky. We become the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

We at St. Paul's inhabit Jerusalem in so many ways. I've watched this week as each mail delivery brought applications for this year's outreach grants. Each check we write helps clothe the naked, and the feed the hungry in the city of Philadelphia. St. Paul's outreach grants help bring God's shalom into being.

At last count we have raised enough money to send two shelter boxes to Haiti, and we have parishioners in Haiti right now, working to assess and rebuild permanent housing in the wake of their devastating earthquakes. In the midst of devastation, Port-au-Prince is also Jerusalem.

We become citizens of Jerusalem when we give our time to after school tutoring programs, to making meals for Aid for Friends and Bethesda project, to providing temporary housing for IHN guests. God takes up residence with us when we teach English as a second language, help bring prison inmates to literacy, provide free legal counsel to single parents or prom dresses to inner city high schoolers. We we abide under God's wings when we send bags of school supplies to Africa or share a summer camp experience with Native American teen agers in North Dakota, or City Camp at St. James the Less in Philadelphia.

We share in God's shalom by telling the stories of God's creating and recreating ways, by lifting up our hearts in prayer and our voices in praise, by anointing one another with healing oil, and by taking, blessing, breaking and sharing our bread and our lives. We become the present reality of a future promise. We become that new Jerusalem envisioned in the book of Revelation where God's reign is at last complete:

And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband...the glory of God is its light and the nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it...its gates will never be shut...(Rev. 21)

Jerusalem, Jerusalem. Is it a place or a metaphor? Earth and stones, or a promise? Jesus longs for and gives his life for both Jerusalems. This Lent, let us pray for and let us be the peace of Jerusalem. May they prosper who love you.

Amen.