

Sermon: November 27, 2022 – First Sunday of Advent. Psalm 122.
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB: Rev Greg Wooley

It was my great joy, in March of 2018, to go on a pilgrimage to the land of the Holy One. One of the many memorable moments, was one day at the remnants of the Jerusalem Temple.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, there are many instances when someone says, let us go up to <somewhere> - Jerusalem or some other place. In that hilly country, I learned that this is not like the Canadian usage, where going “up to” somewhere is often “up” in a roadmap sense, like someone in Calgary going “up to Edmonton” or someone from Banff going “up to Jasper”. In scripture, going “up” usually means – as it does with Jerusalem – actually going UP, gaining elevation. So you would go UP to Jerusalem and you would go DOWN to Jericho.

This became instantly evident in our first day of the pilgrimage, standing on the Mount of Olives, looking down at the Kidron Valley and back up to old Jerusalem. A few days later our pilgrim guide, Richard LeSueur, made it that much more real as we experienced the intersection between this topography, and words of worship. {and as an aside, on a couple of bulletin boards in Gordon Hall you’ll see posters about a film project <https://www.pilgrimroutes.ca/> that Richard is presently involved in}.

There are fifteen Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures that are labelled, “Psalms of Ascent”, from Psalm 120 through to Psalm 134. Today’s Psalm, 122, is one of those. What Richard did with us, is to take us to a set of stone steps adjacent to the temple ruins, and do a responsive reading of one of those Psalms, and after each line, we went up a step.

So let’s do that now, with Psalm 122:

- 1 I was glad when they said to me, **“Let us go into the house of the Lord.”** (up one step)
- 2 Our feet have been standing **Within your gates, O Jerusalem!** (up one step)
- 3 Jerusalem is built **As a city that is compact together,** (up one step)
- 4 Where the tribes go up, The tribes of the Lord,
To the Testimony of Israel, To give thanks to the name of the Lord. (up one step)
- 5 For thrones are set there for judgment, **The thrones of the house of David.** (up one step)

And having ascended the steps, the rest of the Psalm would either have been read together, or by the worship leader; in the case of Psalm 122, the prayer for the peace of Jerusalem would have been spoken from high ground, looking over the city.

In this world, there are places that are especially holy. It may be a structure with a lot of human history attached to it, like Old Jerusalem, or the Golden Temple at Amritsar, or Machu Picchu. It may be a sacred mountain, like Iyamnuthka, or Sinai, or Uluru/Ayers Rock. Or it may be a place of great significance to your culture, or your family heritage, or a place you are drawn to return to in your own life’s story. Each of us have these sacred, holy places, and I invite you to spend just a moment dawdling in one of these places, in your mind.

We also have in our life’s journey, sacred places that aren’t really places, but rather, holy moments. This may include the birth of a child, the death of a loved one in your presence, moments in your life in which new truth dawned on you, sacred moments or seasons when God became more than a word to you. It may well include memories of blessed companions on the path of your life. Again, I invite you to spend just a moment, to imagine yourself flipping through an old photo album in your mind, remembering people and events impacting your life in which the space between heaven and earth was very, very thin.

This Advent season, we have chosen to take a different path than usual, a Contemplative path – a path familiar to our Wednesday night Evensong services, but less evident on Sundays.

The Centre for Action and Contemplation defines contemplation in this way:

“Contemplation is the practice of being fully present—in heart, mind, and body—to what is in a way that allows you to creatively respond and work toward what could be.

“The contemplative mind is about receiving and being present to the moment, to the now, without judgment, analysis, or critique. Contemplative ‘knowing’ is a much more holistic, heart-centered knowing, where mind, heart, soul, and senses are open and receptive to the moment just as it is....

“In short, contemplation might be described as entering a deeper silence and letting go of our habitual thoughts, sensations, and feelings in order to connect to a truth greater than ourselves”.

In choosing to set these four Sundays leading up to Christmas as a contemplative time, the hope is that rather than being driven by the frantic pace that typifies and perhaps even defines this time of year, you as an individual worshiper and we as a gathered community of faith will be invited to a perspective that says, “This year I will welcome the incarnation of God, by opening myself to the moment, by inviting silence and depth, by honouring the deep belovedness of each person, each place, each experience.”

And within that, this first Sunday, at the suggestion of Mary Dumka, tomorrow night’s guest presenter on Buddhism, is a Sunday of contentment.

As noted earlier in this sermon, each person in this room has places of contentment where mind, heart, soul and senses are receptive to sacredness. I can’t define that for you, not really, but *you* can; *you* know the moments where God has met you as the still, small voice of calm (cf. 1 Kings 19: 11-12) – or where your senses were suddenly more alive, or where you knew that something had changed within you that could never change back to its old way of being.

Treasuring that collection of experiences, is part of our personal experience of contentment.

So is an understanding, that “good enough” is indeed good enough. Those who may have grown up being fed the lie of inadequacy, that they were destined to fall short of the mark not just in what they do but in who they are, may struggle with the idea that good enough is good enough. Similarly, those who through upbringing or natural inclination are competitive, may see this notion of contentment as flawed or slack.

But within many religious traditions, being content is intimately connected to gratitude for the gift of life. Doeyon Park, a Buddhist Chaplain at New York University, writes this: “In the Won Buddhist tradition, contentment is not the fulfillment of what we want but the understanding of what and how things are. Practicing contentment means using our conscious choice to see what’s here and accept things as they are with gratitude”.

That may sound like a good thing, but before long objections are raised. Park continues, speaking from her experience: “As I’ve taught and practiced contentment, I see many people are against it because they think there will be no growth. In the spiritual practice, contentment is not about having a passive, laid-back attitude and doing nothing because everything is perfect or there’s no need for improvement. It means that we realize and accept what is here and now. When we are content with things and conditions around us, we are more likely to be

calm and open. With calm and open mind, we create more inner space for clarity and understanding. That is what we need in our day-to-day life to make real progress”.

And, perhaps surprisingly, that brings us back to Psalm 122.

Psalm 122 has to it a strong sense of place and presence. In a very astute article, Scott Hoezee, who writes from the Reformed tradition of Protestantism, points out that while Psalm 122 may have originated from the days when people in Jerusalem could ascend the Temple steps and pray over the city, before long, people were exiled, the city overrun, the Temple disgraced. Even by the days of Jesus, the Jerusalem referenced in this Psalm no longer existed, and the grand city it envisions was more nostalgic than realistic.

And yet, there was and is something deeply sacred about this place, and something about the Psalm that can still touch us deeply. We hear the beloved tones of this Psalm, the deep, heartfelt prayers for the holy City, and it touches the sacred moments and places of our lives. For those with experience in Jerusalem, there is an extra layer of connection but it is not tied solely to that place. The honouring of sacred space extends to all places where we feel God active and alive in our lives.

Which, if we truly learn to practice contentment, is every place in our lives. To be content is not to be static or stagnant, but to recognize the holiness of each moment, each place, each relationship, each breath. Dissatisfaction keeps us buying til we have it all, keeps us travelling til we've seen it all, keeps us feeling that if we're not improving, we're failing... but the truth of the matter, when we pause, and breathe, is quite different from that.

To seek contentment, to go deep with God, does not isolate us from hard realities, it opens us to them. Times of contemplation allow us to see the beauty and the brokenness, lives blunted by sorrow or poverty or neglect. That prayer by the Psalmist for the peace of Jerusalem is still valid and still needed, in Jerusalem, in Donetsk, in Gaza, in Yemen, in Colorado Springs and in each classroom that's been locked down due to threat. To be content in my life is not to be complacent about a world in need; it is to be fully present to life, right now.

To examine each day, with gratitude; to accept the gifts of my life, without dissatisfaction; to enter into this festive season, without feeling a need to break the bank to get more stuff; is to say yes to the sacredness of every place, every life, every land. When I can accept that my life is a good thing, my identity as a source of God's own holy light, is unlocked.

And so we give thanks for the gift of contemplation, as well as helpful actions. We give thanks for an attitude of contentment, as well as letting our hearts reach toward those living in fear, pain, trauma or brokenness. We approach life from a perspective of holiness, and in so doing let our hearts be inclined to the very heart of God. And we, in our day, pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and the well-being of every place and person held sacred, everywhere in this blessed, beloved planet. Amen.

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