

Ascending to the New Jerusalem

Introduction

“He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of His beloved Son.” — Colossians 1:13

“Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” — Philippians 3:20

From the days of the early Church, pilgrims have regularly traveled to Jerusalem to replicate the events of Holy Week, the last earthly days of Jesus. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem became a tradition as early as the fourth century when the emperor Constantine erected a basilica, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, over what was reported to be the site of the Crucifixion. To worship at this and other holy sites from Jesus’ earthly life many Christians committed to a long and arduous journey to reach Jerusalem. These pilgrimages had a Lenten character, cleansing the pilgrims spiritually as they traveled the arduous journey which could sometimes take weeks, even months. Pilgrims would use the physical deprivations on the road to encourage themselves in their renunciation of evil and as an occasion for a fair amount of soul-searching and intense prayer. The Church continues to describe our observance of the season of Lent as a pilgrimage. In the invitation to Lent found in the service of Ash Wednesday, the celebrant invites us to “the observance of a holy Lent, by self examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.” These are the ingredients of our spiritual pilgrimage during the Season of Lent.

The primary purpose of a pilgrimage is change. A pilgrimage is a journey that *changes us*. As much as we don’t like it, change is a cardinal mark of every faithful Christian. God loves us too much to leave us as we are. Our sanctification takes place as we struggle with temptation and draw on his grace to repent and return to Him. We are called to live disciplined spiritual lives, and that is a good thing, though it is not always easy or pleasant. This transformation is a lifelong process. We are convicted, our hearts are pierced, we are dragged from our comfort zones, refined by the fire of the Holy Spirit, and made better in and through various means of spiritual transformation. Lenten exercises are intended to move us from self will into God’s will, to turn our attention from the things of this world and onto the way of life in the New Jerusalem. We seek to be transformed into the sorts of people who live lives of grace in Christ.

Scripture tells us that we are pilgrims and exiles on this earth—restless, homeless, and seeking to become less attached to earthly things. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word “pilgrimage” derives from the root meaning to “reside temporarily,” and it was applied particularly to residence in a foreign land. And the Hebrew word for “pilgrim” means “sojourner” or “resident alien.” In the New Testament, the Greek term for “pilgrim” describes Christians whose final citizenship is in heaven, and who are regarded as temporary dwellers on earth.

As noted in the Scriptures quoted above, as Christians we are citizens of the New Jerusalem, but we currently find ourselves as resident aliens in the foreign environment of this secular world. And so we are pilgrims on a journey. We are sojourners moving from this physical world into the promised land of spiritual harmony with our God. We are citizens of Zion currently dwelling in a foreign land. And that was the circumstance of the Jewish exiles in the Old Testament who sang the Songs of Ascent we find in Psalms 120 through 134. Jerusalem was overrun in 597 BC and the Jews were taken to Babylon where they were held captive for seventy years. When the emperor Cyrus came to the throne, in 538 BC, he allowed the Jewish exiles to begin returning and rebuilding Jerusalem. As they made their way to the Holy City, they sang the songs of Zion, songs of ascent. These songs were also later used by the faithful as they made their way to the restored Jerusalem for the major feasts of the Temple. And we can use them now as songs of praise as we ascend toward the New Jerusalem of which we are citizens.

The Songs of Ascent have a logical progression moving us steadily from exile to union with God. These are songs of hope. They give us courage and direction in our journey. As we make our Lenten pilgrimage we will move progressively closer to our permanent home in the New Jerusalem. This week of Ash Wednesday, the meditations will set the stage for our journey. Then each week during Lent we will examine three Songs of Ascent. In week one we will explore what it means to live in exile. During the second week we will begin our journey. In the third week we will enter Zion. Our fourth week will give us direction on making the New Jerusalem our home. And the fifth week will be a celebration of praise in the Temple of the New Jerusalem. Finally, during Holy Week, we will meditate on what it means for us as Christians to truly be residents of the New Jerusalem.

We can learn much from those who made pilgrimages before us. For example, in 1522 St. Ignatius Loyola set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It took him over a year and a half to reach the Holy Land from his home in Spain. He made many stops on the way to seek guidance from Church elders, to meditate on Scripture, and to repent and pray. A true pilgrim must travel slowly and pause often to get where he wants to go. If Ignatius had rushed to Jerusalem he would not have been as well prepared to receive the joy God granted him in the Holy Land. But Ignatius took his time and arrived with an expectant heart, ready to receive God's blessings. That pilgrimage changed his life. There is no journey more important than our Lenten pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem. This is a time for us to slow our steps and take our time to walk the long road of Ascent. Pause often. Let God speak to you through the gift of these Psalms. This is God's gift of time to prepare our hearts and come to realize that Jesus is with us and is speaking to us as we walk the road to Zion and ascend to the New Jerusalem.

The Week of Ash Wednesday
Ash Wednesday, March 2, 2022

Traveling to the New Jerusalem

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...” —Hebrews 12:22

Psalm 87 begins with these words: “On the holy mount stands the city he founded; the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.” This is a place which we should all be eager to visit. It is a place in which all the faithful long to dwell. But the Psalmist indicates that Zion is not only a destination for pilgrimage, it is also our birthplace. In verse four, the Psalmist says, “Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon...Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia...this one and that one were born in her.” These are all Gentile nations. And all of these nations had at one time or another been sworn enemies of God’s people. Many of them had ravaged or destroyed Jerusalem. And yet the Psalmist says that the Most High Himself will establish Zion in order to allow all of these people to be treated as born in her. Jerusalem is the city built upon the hill as a beacon of light for all mankind. In the previous Psalm, the promise is given that “All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord...” (86:9). We are all pilgrims, exiles, traveling to our home, for we were born in Zion. And though, at times, we have lived as enemies of Christ (Eph. 2:11-13; Phil. 3:18), we are among “those who know” God. We are answering the call to “come and worship the Lord”.

Scripture uses two terms, Zion and Jerusalem, to refer to the same place, but they indicate different aspects of the Holy City. The word Zion literally means “marked” or “distinctive”. It refers to the inner qualities that distinguish God’s people. They are a “people who dwell apart” with their own unique relationship with God. Jerusalem, on the other hand, indicates the holy city’s function as a spiritual center, reaching out to, and influencing the nations of the world. Jerusalem is the means by which the Godly spirit found in Zion penetrates the inner life of distant peoples. In short: “Zion” looks inward at the city’s significance for the Jewish people, while “Jerusalem” looks outward at the city’s external role as a spiritual focal point for the entire world. Therefore, our pilgrimage to Jerusalem has a two-fold purpose: we are making a careful self-examination and allowing God to transform us, but we are also looking outward and seeking to reach the least, the lost, and the lonely with the light of the Gospel.

We are citizens of the New Jerusalem, but we are dwelling in the midst of this world, the earthly city. This city, our world, will pass away. It is a fallen world. The New Jerusalem, on the other hand, is stable, eternal, and the dwelling place of God. It is the city under God’s rule, and hence the city in which we will ultimately come to triumph in Christ. That is why we are making this Lenten Pilgrimage.

Thursday After Ash Wednesday
March 3, 2022
The Songs of Ascent: What are they?

*“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction,
that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” —Romans 15:4*

It is important for us to read the Holy Scriptures because they were, as St. Paul said, “written for our instruction”, and through their encouragement “we might have hope.” The Songs of Ascent are songs of hope for pilgrims seeking their home in God’s Holy City. Some have described the Songs of Ascent as a “handbook of devotions for pilgrims”. A full ten percent of the 150 Psalms found in the Bible are written as songs for the journey back to the Lord and to His Holy City. These fifteen Songs of Ascent are Psalms 120 through 134 of the Biblical Psalter.

In the exposition of the Psalms in the *Interpreter’s Bible* (vol. 4, p. 639), the expositor states:

There is much in these fifteen psalms that fits in with the regular visits to the temple for the recognized feasts and festivals. But what has all this to do with us? Why trouble our heads with ancient processions and their musical accompaniments? Actually the question may be raised in many other connections? Why study the classics? Why write and read ancient, or indeed modern, history? Why trouble about the excavation of long-buried deities? Why? Because such investigations help us today. There can be no doubt about this with the Songs of Ascent, especially if we think of life itself as a pilgrimage. We are all travelers upon a path which, though trodden hard by those who were before us, is yet new to us with pleasant and unpleasant surprises at every turn.

So even though these Psalm were written by Jewish exiles making their way back home to a demolished city which they called home, there is something important in each one of these songs for us today. They were “written for our instruction”. But beyond that, when we recite, sing, or simply read these Psalms, we join with every pilgrim who has made the trek toward a closer walk with God. We join even with our Lord Himself who made the earthly pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the great feasts of the Jewish year, and who undoubtedly joined with His disciples in singing these Psalms along the way. In studying the words of the Songs of Ascent we are instructed in how to prepare to enter into the New Jerusalem, and to offer pleasing worship to God in His Holy Temple.

There is an ebb and flow to these Psalms when read them in order. As we move steadily through this “handbook of devotions for pilgrims” we move out of allegiance to, and dependence on the things of this world and make a steady progression into the New Jerusalem. And once we are there, we learn how to make our home in His Presence, His dwelling place, and offer pleasing and laudable worship to Him.

The Songs of Ascent are our “map quest”, the directions we need to find our way out of this world and into the place where we belong as citizens of the Kingdom.

Friday After Ash Wednesday
March 4, 2022

Who is singing? and to Whom?

“With weeping they shall come, and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back, I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble, for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.’” —Jeremiah 31:9-10

There is a reflection of Psalm 23 in the passage quoted above from Jeremiah. Though we may be walking “through the valley of the shadow of death” in this secular world, the Good Shepherd will give us green pastures, and “will make [us] walk by brooks of water in a straight path.” He will not allow us to stumble if we keep our focus on Him. This is what we are witnessing and experiencing in reading and singing the Songs of Ascent. But by whom were these songs written, and to whom are they sung?

As we have seen, these Psalms were written by the Jewish exiles who were held captive in Babylon in the sixth century BC. Once the Jews were released and allowed to return to their home, and allowed to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, they sang of their struggles both in captivity and in the arduous journey back to their homeland. They were singing with their hearts turned toward God in gratitude and praise, but they were also singing in communion with one another as encouragement to each other, for the road home was a difficult one. The Psalms point to their recognition of the need for God, and their need for each other in making this journey.

The Psalter as a whole is a collection of reflections of the human heart. The Psalms cover the gamut of human experience in relation to God. They are expressions of our experience of the Almighty, and reflect both the good and the bad things that happen to us when we pursue our relationship with Him. Bishop Demetri, of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, in his foreword to the book *Christ in the Psalms*, by Patrick Henry Reardon, said:

The Psalms are important because they express in divinely inspired language the innermost thought and even fears of humanity. The Psalms express the wonder felt by those who gaze at the glory of God’s creation. They give words to the intense sorrow for sin. They profoundly express the horror of loneliness and alienation. No matter how deeply invaded by sentiments of despair, one finds these feelings echoed in the Psalms themselves, and, more important, finds them answered by the glorious message of the love of God. Most important, however, the Psalms point toward the ultimate liberation of humanity from sin, death, and despair through Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is only through Christ that we can understand the poetic language of the Psalms...It is most significant that, when He hung on the Cross, Our Lord quoted from the Psalms.

As we begin this Lenten Pilgrimage, we are called to focus our attention on Zion, not the world. As we listen to and join in singing the Songs of Ascent, let us hear in them the Word of the Lord. Let us listen to Him. For in Him we will find hope and salvation. We are marching to Zion.

Saturday After Ash Wednesday March 5, 2022

We are Pilgrims on a Journey

“We are pilgrims on a journey, We are travelers on the road, We are here to help each other, Walk the mile and bear the load.” —The Servant Song, by Richard Gillard ©1977 Scripture in Song. Used by permission. CCLI License #1092004

Spiritual pilgrimages are never taken alone. Even “solitary” pilgrimages are built on the backs of all previous pilgrims and their insights and accomplishments. For example, when St. Ignatius Loyola took his solo trek from Spain to Jerusalem, as was mentioned in the introduction, he stopped numerous times along the way to learn from the elders in the cities and cathedrals of Europe. He knew to make the pilgrimage because of what he had learned from others who had preceded him on the journey. We know that a Lenten pilgrimage has potential benefits for us personally and for the Church as a whole because there are those who have made this pilgrimage before and who have left a legacy for us. And we can learn from our predecessor’s mistakes and triumphs. We are pilgrims on a journey. We are also here “to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.”

St. Paul tells us in Galatians 6:2 that we are to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” We are in this journey together. We are one Body in Christ. We are each in a unique place, with a unique calling, but that calling is given to us for the common good. As St. Paul reminds us in his first letter to the Corinthians, each one of us is essential to the whole. “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (12:27).

The Jewish pilgrims, the returning exiles who wrote the Songs of Ascent, would have known this truth from the writings of the scriptural wisdom literature. In Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, the preacher wrote: “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

As we make our way through this Lenten pilgrimage, as we seek the New Jerusalem, let us do it together. You may read these meditations alone, but do not neglect to talk to others in the parish about what the Lord is saying to you in them. In the epistle to the Hebrews (10:24-25) we are reminded that we need to make this journey together. The author says, “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

“We are pilgrims on a journey...we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.”

The First Week of Lent Sunday, March 6, 2022

How Do We Sing the Lord's Song in a Foreign Land?

“How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!”

—Psalm 137:4-6

We begin our journey in a foreign land. Through baptism we were born into Zion, we were made citizens of the New Jerusalem, but we are separated from the land of our birth by our sin. The process of sanctification is the heart of our journey toward the Promised Land. In this first full week of Lent we will explore what it means to live in exile. This world, the secular society in which we dwell physically, is not our permanent home. It is a territory fraught with distractions which seek to draw our attention away from our true home and our loving Father. St. Peter strongly warns us to beware. He says, “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11). And he adds a few chapters later: “Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you” (1 Peter 5:8-10).

We are citizens of the Kingdom. We are sons and daughters of the King. But we are still making our way through this world with all of the challenges and temptations associated with this secular environment. Though we find ourselves in this foreign land, St. Paul exhorts us to keep our eyes lifted up. In Colossians 3:1-4, he says, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

So, here we are now, exiles in this strange and foreign land. Our true home is the Kingdom of our Father. As we begin reading these first three Songs of Ascent, let us look carefully at how we are living our lives as citizens of the Kingdom in a foreign land.

Monday of 1 Lent
March 7, 2022

Living Apart from Zion
Psalm 120

"In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me." —Psalm 120:1

Take a moment and read Psalm 120.

Astronaut Scott Kelly spent an entire year on the International Space Station. He was a willing exile from his "home planet". In his memoir entitled, *Endurance: A Year in Space*, he reflected, "I miss cooking. I miss chopping fresh food, the smell vegetables give up when you first slice into them. I miss the smell of the unwashed skins of fruit, the sight of fresh produce piled high in grocery stores. I miss grocery stores, the shelves of bright colors and the glossy tile floors and the strangers wandering the aisles. I miss people...I miss the sudden chill of wind on my back, the warmth of sun on my face. I miss showers. I miss running water in all its forms: washing my face, washing my hands. I miss sleeping in a bed - the feel of sheets, the heft of a comforter, the welcoming curve of a pillow. I miss the colors of clouds at different times of day and the variety of sunrises and sunsets on Earth." He missed being home, being with those whom he loved. Kelly noted that without daily calls home, and long conversations with his family, he would not have been able to endure that long year.

The Psalmist had a similar experience. There were many things that he undoubtedly missed from his home in Jerusalem. But he, like Scott Kelly, could "phone home". He would do so from his place of prayer. Without his calls to the Lord the Psalmist's exile would have been intolerable. But for what was the Psalmist longing? What was missing that made the exile in Babylon so difficult? It was Jerusalem herself. Jerusalem, the City of Peace. Our Psalmist missed the peace and tranquility that comes from being in a place where people share the same values and can live peaceably together.

Distressed by lying lips and the quarrelsomeness of men, the Psalmist needs the comforting words of his heavenly Father. And so, he phones home. "In my distress I called to the Lord." When we find ourselves torn apart from our home, we can become jaded. It is far too easy to slip into the patterns of behavior of those with whom we live. This is why St. Paul trumpets his warning to the Christians in Rome. He says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). And to the Church at Corinth, which was notorious for picking up the practices of their pagan neighbors, Paul warns, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals.'" (1 Cor. 15:33).

Our home is the New Jerusalem, but in this present time we live as exiles here in this secular arena. Paul warns us not to become like those with whom we live, but to be different, righteous. We are to go out among the residents of this world and be lights in the darkness. We are called to be with them but not to become like them. Pray for them. Let the love of Christ show through you toward each person with whom you interact each day. The challenge for us, as it was for the Israelites who were in exile in Babylon, is to live in the Lord, though apart from our home with Him. Jesus said that He has not called us out of this world, but that He would keep us from evil one (John 17:15; 15:19). That is why, while we live apart from Zion, we need to phone home daily.

Tuesday of 1 Lent
March 8, 2022

Exiles in a Foreign Land
Psalm 120

“Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.” —Psalm 120:6

The verse quoted above from Psalm 120 could have been penned today. The climate in which we find ourselves is one of seemingly perpetual conflict. There are the constant political conflicts, the standoff between vaxers and antivaxers, the agitation between the pro-life and pro-choice camps, and dozens of other causes around which sides are drawn. And never shall the twain meet in civil conversation. Too long has it been since we could live in harmony and peace with those who differ from us. The Honorable Craig Horn, a former member of the North Carolina General Assembly, in a 2018 commencement ceremony at South Piedmont Community College, offered the following observation to those who were about to graduate:

We love it when public leaders stand tall, but only when they stand tall for what we believe. We love it when our elected officials cast an unpopular vote, but only if that vote agrees with our own. And we cheer on the one that marches to a different drummer, but only when we hear the same music. These days we disagree on just about everything: racial issues, immigration issues, bathroom issues, healthcare law, same-sex marriage, and who should be president. Sadly, we do this with rants, screams, interruptions, street protests that are increasingly violent, and personal attacks that are increasingly virulent. We not only have our own opinions, but we also seem to have our own facts. These disagreements can make us more hoarse, but they seldom make us more smart. They rarely sharpen our thinking much less change our minds. The result is that we no longer can even have discussions about issues on which we disagree.

We are citizens of the New Jerusalem, but we are resident in the city of this secular world. In his letter to the exiles in Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah said, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:4-7). We are to pray for THIS city. And Solomon reminds us that “By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked. He who belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent” (Prov. 11:11-12). And St. Peter exhorts us to “Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (1 Pet. 2:17). But sadly, in the current political climate, it has become commonplace for Christians to curse the current office-holders, whether president, senator, representative, state governor, or city mayor. Yet, Scripture commands that we not speak evil of a ruler of the people (Exodus 22:28; Acts 23:5).

The Psalmist was in exile in the midst of a people who hated peace. But he continued to pursue peace. He said, “I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war.” That is not unlike the present circumstances in this country. These may be evil times, but Jesus knows that, and He gives us a clear directive to follow: “I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also... You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:39-45). Let us, then, follow this pattern for peace!

Wednesday of 1 Lent
March 9, 2022

Look to the Hills
Psalm 121

*“I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” —Psalm 121:1-2*

Take a moment and read Psalm 121.

Bishop Terwilliger was my spiritual director when I was in seminary. He was from the hill country of upstate New York. When he first flew to Dallas after being elected suffragan bishop of Dallas, his first thought as he gazed from the window of the plane on his approach to DFW airport was, “It’s so flat!” The sight of the mountains holds a certain comfort for those of us who call the mountain regions our home. The Psalmist would agree. From the far distant city of their exile on the low, flat plains of Babylon and the banks of the Euphrates River, the Psalmist turns to the west and cries a longing plea to God that he may return to the hills of his homeland.

The first words of Psalm 121, “I lift up my eyes to the hills,” should sound very familiar to Asheville residents. They are printed, in Latin, on our city seal: “*LEVO OCULOS MEOS IN MONTES*”. Asheville and Jerusalem have much in common. The elevation of the two cities is nearly identical, and both are surrounded by mountains. And for those of us in Christ Jesus, both are our home. For me, when I travel, there is no more comforting sight as I make my return home, than to see the mountains in the distance as I come up I-40 from the Piedmont or climb the Saluda grade on I-26 from South Carolina. This same longing, to see the mountains, was in the heart of the Psalmist as he penned the words of this Psalm.

But a journey home for the exiles would be difficult, even impossible, without the help of the Lord. It would take about four months for a camel-driven caravan to travel the more than 900 miles from Babylon to Jerusalem. Babylon, at its highest point, is only about 100 feet above sea level. And the journey west, toward Jerusalem, would be across sun scorched desert wasteland. And the last part of the journey would be a precipitous climb. The exiles would need to cross the Jordan near the Dead Sea which is 1410 feet below sea level, then climb almost 4000 feet over the mountains before reaching the Holy City. But any journey home is worth the effort, and the Psalmist’s heart ached to make the journey.

The Word of the Lord to the exiles was that they would return to their homeland. Seeking the vision of the Lord the Psalmist turns toward Jerusalem and stands on that promise. But he also recognized that pursuing the promises of God can be difficult in a foreign land. Nevertheless, the pursuit of God, and fulfillment of His will, is always worth the hard work. Also we must remember that we never pursue God’s promises alone. God is with us, and “He will not let your foot be moved... The Lord is your keeper, the Lord is your shade on your right hand” (vv. 3,5). He will keep us sure-footed on the climb, and shielded from the sun in the desert wastelands.

So, we lift our eyes to the hills. We lift our eyes to our home. We lift our eyes to the Lord. From Him comes our help. He who made heaven and earth will be with us, we need only look to Him.

Thursday of 1 Lent
March 10, 2022

The Lord will Keep You
Psalm 121

*“The Lord will keep you from all evil; He will keep your life.
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.” —Psalm 121:7-8*

The promise that the Psalmist stands upon is that the Lord “will keep you from all evil; He will keep your life.” This hopeful exile is already looking toward life in Jerusalem where homes will be rebuilt and the returnees will be able to go out and come in from their own homes. For the Jews, that “going out and coming in” is a sacred act. The doorway of a home is reminiscent of the first Passover in Egypt when God commanded the Israelites to sprinkle blood on the doorposts as a sign, and for protection from the angel of death (Exodus 11). Faithful Jews place a Mezuzah on their doorposts as a reminder of this protection. A Mezuzah is a small decorative case containing a fragment of parchment upon which the words of the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9) are written. This fulfills the command to “write the words of God on the doorposts of your house” (Deut. 6:9). When we go out or come in to our home we are passing, as it were, from one world to another. As liturgical Christians, we can sanctify that transition with a font of holy water by the doorway. When we make the sign of the cross with the holy water upon our departure or our return, it is a reminder to us that though we may be moving out into the world, or returning from it, we belong to another kingdom, and by our baptism we have been marked as Christ’s own forever. We are reminded that the Lord will be with us; He will keep us from all evil; He will keep our life.

This “signing,” as we pass through the doorway of our home, is a sign of worship. Worship is the essential component of our life in Christ as we walk in His paths. Worship is the practice of putting God first in all that we do. It is the act of assigning “worth” to God above the worth we place on the things of this world. As we sanctify the doorway of our home, we declare our home to be first and foremost a “house of God”, and we make our home in Him. Our homes are intended by God to be havens of peace, even as Jerusalem is the “City of Peace”.

The prophet Isaiah foresaw the day when the Lord would restore Jerusalem, and at the beginning of his written prophecy he cried out,

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’
(Is. 2:2-3)

The Psalmist wanted to return to Jerusalem, to the mountain of the house of the Lord, and to rebuild the house of worship, the Holy Temple, on that mountain. Then both returnees and the pilgrims from the nations could go out and come in to the Lord’s house and He could “teach us His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.” And the Psalmist’s hope stretched further, that even the homes of the returnees would be safe havens, places where they could go out and come in before the Lord. He believed that the Lord would keep their lives in His eternal care, that their homes would be places of worship.

“The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.” Let us give to Him who keeps us from all evil the worth that He so richly deserves.

Friday of 1 Lent
March 11, 2022

The Call to Pilgrimage
Psalm 122

“I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord!” — Psalm 122:1

Take a moment and read Psalm 122.

On the prie-dieu (kneeling prayer desk) in my home, I have a printed copy of this psalm. It is a constant reminder for me that when I am in prayer I am in the house of the Lord; I am standing in the New Jerusalem. In verse 2 of Psalm 122, the New American Standard Version translates the Hebrew as, “Our feet are standing within your gates Jerusalem.” The Hebrew is difficult to translate, and the verb could be present, perfect, participial, or past tense. The KJV makes it future tense: “Our feet shall stand...” Wycliff translated it as past tense: “Our feet were standing...” But regardless of the tense, the fact remains that for the exiles in Babylon, they were looking toward the Holy City and the future temple and were seeing it as a present reality. For us today, we know that when we are in Christ, we are standing within the gates of the New Jerusalem, and worshipping in His Holy Temple.

There are three significant statements in the first half of this Psalm to which we can cling as citizens of Christ’s Kingdom. The first was explicated in the previous paragraph. The second statement which has an impact on our situation and relationship with the Lord is found in verse 3: “Jerusalem... a city bound firmly together.” Though we cannot physically see the oneness of the New Jerusalem, we know that in Christ we are one. There is one body in Christ, and we all worship together in the one Spirit (Eph. 4:4; Rev. 5:11-14). And thirdly, we go up to Jerusalem, “as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the Name of the Lord” (vs. 4). We come together in the Spirit to worship, to give thanks, to praise His Holy Name. All of this is present tense and fulfills the command to go up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord.

There is abundant good news in this truth. St. Paul gave us a glimpse of this in chapter 2 of his epistle to the Ephesians. He said, “So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (vv. 19-22). In our worship of God in the New Jerusalem, whether physically together or separated by miles and time, we are being built up into a Holy Temple in the Lord. When we come together as One Body in the Spirit, God richly dwells in our midst.

This psalm celebrates the chosen city and the privilege we have in making our daily pilgrimage to Zion. When we recite this psalm, or even better, when we sing it together in our gathered worship, we are fulfilling the task of pilgrim worship in God’s holy temple. And when we are “bound firmly together” then Jesus, our Davidic King, is lifted up and is tangibly present with us, and our feet are firmly planted as we stand within the gates of the New Jerusalem.

Saturday of 1 Lent
March 12, 2022

Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem
Psalm 122

*“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! “May they prosper who love you!
Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers!” — Psalm 122:6-7*

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!” The name, Jerusalem, means “City of Peace”. The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*. This comes from the Hebrew word *shalem*, which means complete or whole. But is Jerusalem a city of peace? Is it whole? Today it is a city divided between the Jewish sector, the Arab sector, and the Christian sector. On the Jewish Temple mount stands the Muslim Dome of the Rock. Jesus said that this is the city that killed the prophets and stoned those who were sent to her (Matt. 23:37). It is the city where our Lord was arrested and crucified. And before His entry into the city, Jesus wept over her, saying, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:42-44).

We are commanded to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. And we should pray for peace in the earthly Jerusalem. Peace in the Middle East is dependent upon the peace of the Holy City. But there is also a heavenly peace and a heavenly Jerusalem. It is for this heavenly home of ours that we are obliged to pray. In Galatians 4:26, St. Paul says that “the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.” There is a peace that can be found in Christ, in the gathering of the faithful in the New Jerusalem, but we do not see that peace realized in the Church today. The Church is as heavily divided as the earthly Jerusalem. We need to pray for peace in the Body of Christ, that there may be unity found in the saints’ worship of our Lord, whether physically gathered or separated by denominations, color, doctrine, or economic status. We need to learn to pray with one heart and one mind in Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:27), for it is only in Him and His heart that true peace will reign in His Church. This is the peace that Jesus promised to give His disciples saying “my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (John 14:27). And He fulfilled that promise after His resurrection when He met the disciples in the upper room. The Risen Lord greeted His frightened followers saying, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19). The peace of God is found in His Son, Jesus. Our responsibility is to pray that His peace may be made manifest in His Church, and through His Church into the world.

The psalmist begins his song with the words, “I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord!” When the saints come together in worship, Jesus is present. He has promised that “where two or three are gathered in My Name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20). It is in His Presence that we find peace, and a measure of sanity in the midst of the discord we find in the world. We need the peace of Jerusalem. We need the concord and sanity we find in Christ and His gathered Body. For it is in Christ and His divine Presence that we are freed from anxiety and fear. When we lose ourselves in worship and adoration, we find our true self dwelling in the New Jerusalem, the City of Peace.

The Second Week of Lent Sunday, March 13, 2022

Beginning our Journey

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”
— Jeremiah 29:11

During this second week of Lent we begin our journey. It is time to begin to move out of captivity and exile into freedom. The hopeful expectation we have experienced this past week becomes the reality of the journey in the following three psalms. We have looked toward the New Jerusalem; now we begin to take steps to come home. Our eyes must be fixed on the goal, the object of our desire. We must begin to develop a vertical view of life. Jesus said that if we want all of the good things in our lives we must first seek Him, for it is in Him that “all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

But there are many who are reluctant to step out. For some there is fear. It could be fear of the unknown, fear of losing friends in this world, of losing themselves, or simply fear of change. For some, they have become comfortable in this secular world and their reluctance is in reality a rejection of the Lord’s plan for their lives. This journey makes too many demands on the pilgrim, they say, religion should make me comfortable, not miserable! But the Lord says, “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10). In truth, we do not know what we need. We have never walked this path before. The quote from Jeremiah above should be a comfort for the reluctant. And this hope is reiterated by St. Paul: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

And it is not simply that the Lord will be with us. Scripture tells us that He is to be our dwelling place. He is the goal. Our journey is to grow into a fuller life in Him. As we begin, we take a step up and move further in. In the *The Last Battle*, the final book of the Chronicles of Narnia series by C.S. Lewis, in chapter 16, Reepicheep, the warrior mouse, greets the travelers as they come into the New Narnia, saying, “Welcome, in the Lion’s name. Come further up and further in.” And Lucy, standing with Mr. Tumnus, the Faun, observes, “The garden is like the Stable it is far bigger inside than outside.” The Faun answered, “The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets.” But Lewis says that “It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed, and then he cried: ‘I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this...Come further up, come further in!’”

God is faithful. If we earnestly seek Him, He will always give us more, and it will always be better than we could have imagined. We need only wait upon Him. He will protect and provide for our every need. St. Peter said that “according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). And the Psalmist said, “Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways” (Psalm 91:9-11). There is simply no reason to not take this journey. The Lord is with us, and we are on this journey together. So, let us step out and come further up and further in.

Monday of 2 Lent
March 14, 2022

Praying for Protection on the Journey
Psalm 123

“To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!” — Psalm 123:1

Take a moment and read Psalm 123.

This journey requires that we change our perspective, to focus not on the things of this world but to have a vertical view of life. “To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!” But breaking the chains that hold us to a horizontal view of life, to cease looking at the things around us which draw our attention away from God, is a difficult process. David Craig, in his master’s thesis for Bakke Graduate University, said, “Why are so many Christians not living in a Christ-like manner? The primary problem is Christians have become more influenced by a secular worldview than by a worldview that is Theocentric. Secularism has made a literal beeline to the heart of the Christian faith. Our culture has a greater impact on Christians than does Christ. Man-centered thinking has infiltrated the heart and soul of the Church and Christians are more concerned about pleasing men than God.”

This is not a new problem. The Old Testament is rife with stories of kings, priests, and the people of God who abandon God and seek to be like the nations of the world. That is why they asked Samuel for a king! (1 Samuel 8:19-20). This was a continuing problem among the exiles in Babylon. The Psalmists of the Songs of Ascent are all calling upon the people of God to turn from their earthly preoccupations and “lift up your eyes”. It continues to be a problem for God’s people today. But what the Psalmist is calling for in Psalm 123 is for the people of God to look up, to look to the Lord in Whom we have every provision for our lives. For it is in Christ that we have life. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life! Karl Barth, the early 20th century theologian said, “There exists what we may call a vertical view of true service of God or the true Christian life. When we understand the Christian life in the light of its origin and object, it is simply and without reservation the life of Jesus Christ Himself, so far as men through God’s Holy Spirit are united with Him in faith, so far does His life become theirs and their life His.”

How do we do this as we set out on this pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem? The Psalmist says that we are to “look to the Lord our God, until He has mercy upon us” (vs. 2). We pray earnestly. We keep our eyes fixed upon Him, not on the things of this world. It takes effort, discipline, and patience. We persevere “until He has mercy upon us.” It takes the Grace of God. So the Psalmist reminds us to look to God “as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master...so our eyes look to the Lord...”

We will get distracted. We will look away from time to time. It is a long journey through some difficult terrain, but whenever we find we have strayed, when our attention has wandered, we can turn back. For as the Chronicler declares, “For if you return to the Lord, your brethren and your children will find compassion with their captors, and return to this land. For the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him” (2 Chronicles 30:9).

Tuesday of 2 Lent
March 15, 2022

We have had more than enough of contempt
Psalm 123

“Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.” — Psalm 123:3

Psalm 137 talks about the torment to which the exiles were subjected in their exile from the Holy Land. The Psalmist says, “there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’” (Ps. 137:3). And the author of that particular Psalm was not inclined toward mercy for his captors. He concludes his lament with one of the harshest statements found in all of Holy Scripture: “Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” (Ps. 137:9). Many are appalled by this verse, but we must remember that thoughts of this type, if we are truly honest, are not foreign to us. The Psalmist has simply recorded, said out loud, what many of us have harbored in our hearts toward those who wish to do us harm, for those who hold us in contempt, and scorn us unmercifully. The Psalmist is being honest about his feelings and his thoughts!

We all are guilty, from time to time, of the sin of scorn. Before you quickly deny that, think about the last time you said something less than flattering about a politician. There is a reason that the Lord commands us not to speak evil of (or to scorn) a ruler of the people. It turns away the favor of the Lord from His people. Solomon said that God is scornful toward the scorners! (Prov. 3:34). When we speak against another, whether they hear our words or not, we stand in judgment over them and create division in the Body. Yet, Solomon gives us an alternative: “but to the humble he shows favor” (Prov. 3:34). And again, the book of Proverbs records that “Scoffers set a city aflame, but wise men turn away wrath” (Prov. 29:8). There is blessing for those who avoid the scandal of scoffing. “Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful...” (Ps. 1:1 NKJV).

The author of Psalm 123, when faced with similar scorn and contempt, asks the Lord for mercy. There is no prayer for punishment or retribution on his tormentors. He is getting ready for a long journey to a renewed relationship with His Lord, and he wants to practice fidelity to God’s commands to “love your neighbor as yourself.” The Psalmist is asking God for the grace to change his horizontal perspective into a vertically inspired perspective. He is asking that he may see the world around him and those who dwell in it with the eyes of God. This is reflective of the song’s first verse, “To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!” If we are truly focused on God, we will not be concerned with what others have to say about us, or what evil our tormentors have fashioned against us. It is God’s job to deal with those who oppose us, and we have no power to change them. But we can ask and allow God to change our hearts, to have mercy upon us. And in so doing we place ourselves fully in His loving care. He will bless and protect us if we keep our eyes focused on Him.

Wednesday of 2 Lent
March 16, 2022

The Celebration of Deliverance
Psalm 124

“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side...” —Psalm 124:1

Take a moment and read Psalm 124.

The opening verses of this psalm are set in a liturgical format, a versicle and response. The cantor sings: “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, let Israel now say...”; and the people respond, “if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us...”, and they conclude the thought with the remaining verses of the psalm. This call and response format creates the sense of ownership of the truths found in the words of the psalm. This is the same format that is used at the beginning of the prayer of consecration at Holy Eucharist, called the *sursum corda*. The priest says, “Lift up your hearts”, and the people respond, “We lift them up to the Lord.” The people express their willingness to participate and “own” the thanksgiving being offered to God in the consecration prayer.

Here, in Psalm 124, the people are claiming their readiness to set out toward Jerusalem, even though their enemies, tormentors, and captors have done all they could to discourage them and keep them bound in their fears. Verses 3 through 5 give examples in poetic imagery of the trials and tribulations the exiles have experienced in their captivity. But they cry out, “if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us up alive...” The faithful are declaring their faith; they are proclaiming their trust in God’s deliverance and provision for the journey ahead. They also recognize that what is ahead is a perilous journey where they will be under constant threat, but they are willing to stand on the promise that the Lord who has delivered them in the past will deliver them on the road ahead.

The pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem knew they could not make the journey alone. In the same way we are helpless to make the journey to the New Jerusalem alone. It is easy to become ensnared in the dangers and temptations of this world, and we are all too prone to take control of our lives rather than trust in the Lord. The Jews knew that nothing human could save them, and there is nothing human that can save us. St. Paul, in Romans 8:18, said, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” The Lord who made heaven and earth is fully capable of saving us and setting us at liberty from all evil. Let us take a more in-depth look at that promise tomorrow.

Thursday of 2 Lent
March 17, 2022

Our Help is in the Name of the Lord
Psalm 124

“Our help is in the Name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” —Psalm 124:8

Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). All power and authority belong to the Lord. As we saw in the early verses of this Psalm, the Lord who made heaven and earth, and who has given all authority to His Son, Jesus, is fully capable of saving us and setting us at liberty from every evil. But we get scared, and we get confused when things go awry. Then we take up the mantle of authority and try to correct the matter in our own power.

Sadly, there are many who believe that what Benjamin Franklin wrote in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* is scriptural: “God helps those who help themselves.” This was not a new or unique thought for Ben Franklin. This expression of self-sufficiency and initiative has its origins in ancient Greek mythology where the phrase “the gods help those who help themselves” is found. Indeed, versions of the expression appear in several ancient Greek tragedies, and is stated as the moral of Hercules and the Waggoner, in one of Aesop's fables (english.stackexchange.com). But what does the Scripture say? In Philippians 2:12-13, St. Paul says, “...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Yes, we are to “work out our own salvation”, however, we are incapable of doing that in our own power, and we have no authority to bring about the change necessary to secure that salvation. “God is at work in us.” It is His power and authority made manifest in His Son, working in us by the Person of the Holy Spirit, who secures that help which we so desperately need. Paul goes on to say in the next chapter, “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...” (Philippians 3:7-9).

“Our help is in the Name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” The Psalmist knows that he must make the effort to move out of the troubling circumstances of his captivity. He must take a step in faith toward God and the land to which God is calling him. Then, his faith assures him that God will provide all of the necessary provision and protection he needs for the journey. We listen to His call, we take the step to show our good faith, and God works out the rest, if we will remain in Him.

Friday of 2 Lent
March 18, 2022

Drawing Near: a Vision of the New Jerusalem
Psalm 125

“As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people, from this time forth and forevermore.”
—Psalm 125:2

Take a moment and read Psalm 125.

During the pilgrimage that Miranda and I made to Israel in 2010, we took a bus from Galilee to Jerusalem. As we headed south, we followed the Jordan river down from Galilee, which is about 700 feet below sea level, toward the Dead Sea, which is about 1400 feet below sea level. Then we turned west past where Jericho once stood, and wound our way up the mountain. After a climb of about 4000 feet we topped the mountains to the east of Jerusalem and had our first sight of the Holy City. This is what the returning exiles would have experienced as they crossed this last geographical obstacle on the journey back to their homeland (though not from a bus). The view is spectacular. Jerusalem, like Asheville, is surrounded by mountains. The Holy City is nestled in the Kidron Valley. Zion, and the temple mount, are built on a rise above the valley, bordered on the east by the Mount of Olives, and on the west by Mount Herzl. As the pilgrims gazed at the ruins of the city waiting to be rebuilt, they sang their praises and made their promises. This is the “land allotted to the righteous” they sang, and “the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on it.”

There are both physical and spiritual mountains in our lives. Some of these, like health issues and monetary problems, must be overcome like the physical mountains over which the pilgrims had to hike. Some are spiritual mountains, like the disappointments and failures we all endure from time to time. There are also the hard feelings we may have toward people who hurt us, loved ones who betray us, and lost opportunities which bring doubt and from time to time crises of faith. But there are also those positive spiritual mountains, like our faith and worship of the Lord, which provide protection for us, like the mountains surrounding Jerusalem shelter the holy city. But the physical and spiritual must work together. Jerusalem was overrun and taken captive in the sixth century BC. Why? Because they had forsaken the spiritual shelter of their commitment to the Lord, trusting instead in the protection of the mountains and the help of men. The Lord allowed them, then, to be overrun by Nebuchadnezzar so that they would recognize their need for the Lord. The Psalmist is calling the faithful to return to both the physical and spiritual mountains of Zion. “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people...” It is a call, as the pilgrims begin again to settle in the Promised Land, to immerse themselves in the Lord. He is calling them to remain loyal to God “both now and forevermore!” When we practice fidelity toward our Lord then we will be like Mount Zion “which cannot be shaken but endures forever.” And we can trust that spiritual mountain to provide protection from all forces that would come against us.

Saturday of 2 Lent
March 19, 2022

Jerusalem: the land allotted to the righteous
Psalm 125

“Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts!” —Psalm 125:4

The latter part of this psalm stresses the ideal of what Jerusalem should be. The Psalmist is certain that the faithful will do their part to fulfill the ideal, and that “those who turn aside to their crooked ways the Lord will lead away with evildoers.” The returnees had already experienced the sadness of seeing some turn aside, never leaving Babylon, or returning to it for fear of the journey. These fearful ones thought the demands of the trek were too hard, or the journey fraught with too many dangers. They lost sight of the Lord. But now upon entry into the Promised Land, those pilgrims whose persevered sing of their hope and make their prayers and promises to God.

Their prayer is that they may stand fast: “Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts.” Their prayer is that the favor of the Lord may continue to fall upon them. This is a prayer that is reiterated numerous times in the Psalms. The exiles are looking to rebuild their homes, but they are also looking to reestablish their place of worship and renew their relationship with God. In Psalm 90 verse 17, the Psalmist cries out: “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!” And in Psalm 102:13 the Psalmist declares his faith that, “You will arise and have pity on Zion; it is the time to favor her; the appointed time has come.”

Too often, though, instead of trusting in His promises to us, we make rash promises to God in order to win His favor. This is why it is so important, as we make our way toward the New Jerusalem, that we make the trek together. We must hold one another accountable as we make our way through the treacherous terrain of this world on our journey to the heart of God. The exiles’ promise is that “the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land”. This is an admirable goal for the rebuilding of the “land allotted to the righteous”. But that promise is made in the context of the previous verse. Verse 2 declares that “the Lord surrounds His people”, and verse 3 begins with the word “For”. This is an “if/then” promise. If the Lord is with us, then the wicked will not rule the land. If we continue to seek God “with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our strength,” then we will know God’s favor. As Psalm 41:11 declares, “By this I know that you delight in me: my enemy will not shout in triumph over me.”

Proverbs 11:27 declares, “Whoever diligently seeks good seeks favor...” For us to seek good is to seek God. Jesus Himself said to the rich young man, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18). The ideal set forth in Psalm 125 is that Jerusalem will be inhabited with the righteous, those who seek God. And God promises in return that “In a time of favor I will answer you... I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages” (Isaiah 49:8). This is the ideal for which the returnees were striving. It is an ideal for those of us on the pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem.

The Third Week of Lent Sunday, March 20, 2022

Entering Zion

*“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he.” —Zechariah 9:9*

On the 20th anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood, Bishop Dale Howard visited our parish to help us commemorate that milestone. In his sermon at the Eucharist he compared me to an ass. He said that the ass upon which Jesus sat as He came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday thought that the celebration was all about him. There was much for the residents of Jerusalem to celebrate that day, but the appearance of an ass was not one of those things. He was a necessary part of the event. His presence was a fulfillment of prophecy. But the ass was not the focal point of the celebration. Bishop Howard then said, “You are that ass. You may think we are here to celebrate you—your ministry—but this celebration is not about you. It’s about Jesus. This service is a celebration of Jesus. But rejoice! Our Lord spoke through an ass before; He can do it again.”

In this third week of Lent we will enter Zion. But, we will not be the focal point of the entry celebration. Nevertheless, in the same way that the arrival in Jerusalem of the ass upon which Jesus sat fulfilled prophecy, and like the return of the exiles from Babylon is a fulfillment of prophecy, so our entry into Zion is likewise a fulfillment of the prophetic word. We enter into the New Jerusalem through the Person of Jesus Christ. We were baptized into Christ, and we were marked as Christ’s own forever. In the revelation given to St. John, the Apostle says, “Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads” (Rev. 14:1). We are marked. We have His mark on our forehead—on our lives. And by His sacrifice we are made worthy to be numbered with the saints. We enter Jerusalem through the Lamb. Our entry into the New Jerusalem is about Jesus. It is a celebration of Jesus.

We have left captivity. We have made the journey to Zion. Now it is time to enter. And there is work to do. We rejoice. We build. We establish our homes, our very lives, in Jesus. It is a tremendous gift to call Jerusalem our home. But every home requires care. The exiles had much rebuilding to do once they had arrived in the Promised Land. But there was opposition. There were obstacles that had to be overcome. What must we do? As we continue our progress through the Songs of Ascent, let us look at what the Psalms of this third week teach us about entering into the New Jerusalem.

Monday of 3 Lent
March 21, 2022

Remember what the Lord has done for us
Psalm 126

*“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” —Psalm 126:1-2*

Take a moment and read Psalm 126.

Many years ago I had a wound on the middle finger of my right hand that would not heal. Every time I bent that finger the wound would open and start to bleed. Once, while celebrating Eucharist, I bent that finger and it started to bleed. I had to stop the celebration to deal with the wound. I asked the congregation to pray that God would quickly heal that injury. After the service, a well-meaning parishioner told me that if I only had faith, God would have already healed it. Her comfort was like the comfort of Job’s three friends.

Whenever difficulties happen to faithful believers, there are those who begin to doubt the calling of God in their life. In essence they say, “If God were truly with us, these bad things would not have happened.” And the enemy joins in to discourage the believers. The exiles returning to Jerusalem met immediate opposition from their neighbors in the surrounding regions. Ezra records that “The people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose...and they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem” (Ezra 4:4-6). But the Psalmist reminds the people Who it was that called them to this homeland of theirs, and how excited they were to receive that call: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.” Throughout the Old Testament the people of God remind themselves of who God is by reciting what He has done for the Jews throughout their history. And Ezra the priest, Nehemiah the governor, and the psalmists all encourage the people with repeated recollections. “...[the Lord] saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh...” (Nehemiah 9:9). “In [the Lord] our fathers trusted; they trusted, and [He] delivered them” (Psalm 22:4). “The hand of our God was on us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way” (Ezra 8:31). We all need to be repeatedly reminded of God’s grace, that “The Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.”

Everyone has moments in his or her life when the Lord has done great things, moments when He is tangibly real, moments when in retrospect it all seems like a dream. And we hold on to those moments. Like the Psalmist we remember the Lord’s work in our lives and “Then our mouth is filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” But there are those desert moments as well, like the exiles experienced in dealing with opposition to the rebuilding of the city. Doubt creeps in. Discouragement becomes the reality of our days. And despair threatens to take root. That is the time for us to remember the “goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” (Psalm 27:12-14). That is the time to sing His praise. When the Psalmist said, “My tears have been my food day and night,” he remembers how he “would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival” (Psalm 42:3-5). It has been a difficult couple of years. But there has never been a better time for us to remember the goodness of God, and to sing His praise. Let our “our mouth be filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” Remember!

Tuesday of 3 Lent
March 22, 2022

God's People will Dwell in the Midst of Jerusalem
Psalm 126

"Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negeb." —Psalm 126:4

In the first part of this Psalm we were looking back, remembering how "the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion..." Now the Psalmist turns his eyes toward the future, petitioning God to continue His work of restoration. He appeals to God for the same power that was made manifest in bringing them to the Promised Land to be with them in rebuilding the city and the Temple. Discouragement is threatening to replace the enthusiasm that all had felt in being allowed to return to their homeland. It was taking longer than expected to rebuild the Temple and the walls of the city. Life was hard.

But God did not leave His people without hope. He sent messengers, the prophets, to proclaim His Word to them. In the darkest of days, when the obstacles against them seemed like unscalable mountains, Zechariah brings God's word to Zerubbabel, the governor, saying, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain." (Zech. 4:6-7). And to the people, Zechariah brings this word of hope:

Thus says the Lord: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain. Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. Thus says the Lord of hosts...I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness. (8:3-6,8)

The experience of the returnees is not unlike the experience of many in our day. It has taken much longer to get a handle on this pandemic than anyone expected. The political turmoil, international tensions, and economic uncertainty are all potential catalysts for discouragement and despair. Even within the Church there are divisions and infighting. God is allowing the dismantling of His Church so that He may rebuild it in the Image of Christ. That is a frightening prospect for many of the faithful. But God has allowed these things to take place that the people of God will turn to Him, that we may be His people and He will be our God. Looking at the magnitude of the task ahead with eyes of faith and righteousness we can discern that only God can remake His Church. God brought us here, He can establish us. He can remake us in His Image.

Through this Song of Ascent we have God's promise. If we stand firm in Him, He will restore us. "Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him." Let us stand firm in Him. Let us stand on His promise. And we, too, shall dwell in the midst of the New Jerusalem.

Wednesday of 3 Lent
March 23, 2022

Unless the Lord builds the House...
Psalm 127

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” —Psalm 127:1

Take a moment and read Psalm 127.

This psalm appears to be two separate wisdom psalms that have been bound together. That was not an uncommon practice in Biblical times. But the two parts are tied closely together by a common theme. In the midst of coming into the devastated land of Judah the returnees may have wanted to take up their tools and get to work, trusting in their skills and talents. The Psalmist, though, is reminding them in his Song of Ascent, that without the Lord’s blessing all human toil is worthless and will account for nothing. The psalmist then lists four common human endeavors which cannot be successfully completed if God is not the one who champions the cause, and provides the means. Let us look at these.

First, “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” There is a double meaning here for the returnees. They were building their houses, but the Lord exhorted them through the prophets, especially Haggai, that unless the Lord’s house was established in their midst, their labors on their own homes would be fruitless. He said, “You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house” (1:9). And secondly, unless the Lord builds the “house”—that is the family of each individual—their home and family will not prosper.

Second, “Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” The walls of Jerusalem had been breached and torn down by the Babylonians when they overran the city in 597 BC. The returnees, therefore, felt very vulnerable. They wanted to restore the walls first, before the Temple, but Zechariah, gave this word of prophetic encouragement: “I will be to [Jerusalem] a wall of fire all around, declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst” (2:5). The Lord is our watchman.

Third, “It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.” We are reminded in this verse what St. Paul said to the church at Corinth: “neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7). And Jesus also exhorts the faithful in Luke 12:22-31, saying in part, “But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!”

And fourth, “Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward.” This was prefigured in the first verse. It is God who builds the family. Whether you have children or not, the homes of the faithful must be grounded in the worship of the Lord. There will be more about this tomorrow.

What the Psalmist is declaring in this Song of Ascent as an encouragement for the newly arrived Jews is that faithfulness in everyday life and vitality in worship go together. Without the Lord on our side we will fail. Therefore, “seek first His Kingdom and righteousness,” and all the other things we need will be provided by His all-encompassing love.

Thursday of 3 Lent
March 24, 2022

Our Heritage
Psalm 127

“Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord...” —Psalm 127:3

Children are the Lord’s gift. Some couples are blessed with many children. Some only one or two. Some none at all. But all of us, regardless of the biological children entrusted to our care by the Lord, are responsible for the heritage that we leave to the next generation. How we live our lives in Christ Jesus will impact those who follow us in the Lord. What legacy are we building upon, and what inheritance are we leaving for the children of the following generations?

The parent/child relationship is not the primary relationship given to us in Holy Scripture. The primary motif we find regarding our relationship with the Lord is the bride/bridegroom relationship, the marriage of the Lamb. Jesus is the bridegroom and the Church is the bride (Matt. 25; Rev. 19). But sadly, what we see modeled in the Church today is the disintegration of the family unit. The divorce statistics for the Church are no different than those of the secular world. Children are not being raised in stable home environments. When the Psalmist says, “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain,” he is speaking of the fabric of home life as well as the physical structure of the house. Is it stable? Is it built upon the firm foundation of faith and worship?

It is said that God has no grandchildren, meaning that each of us is responsible for our individual relationship with the Lord. We cannot ride the life of someone else’s faith into the Kingdom. But it is also true that God has no stepchildren. St. Cyprian said that “You cannot have God for your Father if you have not the Church for your mother.” We cannot have a stepmother. The essential component of building a godly legacy for the next generation is our personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the fellowship of His Body, the Church. That love relationship is the model for what we are to pass on to our children, the younger generation in the Church today. St. John tells us, in the prologue of his Gospel, that “to all who received [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:11-13). It is through our relationship with Jesus that we can become children of God. We need to model that relationship for the younger members of the Church.

What the Psalmist is proclaiming in Psalm 127 is that as the exiles return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city with the Temple at its heart, they must also rebuild their families on the foundation of the Lord Himself. The prophet Malachi made clear the Lord’s expectation, saying, “And what is the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth” (2:15). The returnees’ marriages, and the lives of their families, the prophet declares must be grounded in relationship with the Lord and firmly rooted in the worship of the Temple community. For us today, we also must reclaim that primary relationship with the Lord and with His Bride, the Church. We must restore the primacy of Christian marriage as a reflection of the relationship between Christ and His Church.

Friday of 3 Lent
March 25, 2022

The Blessing of God upon our Labors
Psalm 128

“Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways!” —Psalm 128:1

Take a moment and read Psalm 128.

Psalm 128, like Psalm 127, is a wisdom Psalm in the tradition of Solomon. Psalm 127 is attributed to the wise king, but that attribution is most likely a nod to the fact that the content of the psalm is in keeping with the content of the wisdom literature of the Solomonic books. The basic message of Psalm 128 is also in keeping with the wisdom literature of the Bible. The message is essentially practical instruction on how to live a life of reverence, regardless of your place within the community.

The Psalmist declares that blessings belong to those who practice reverence as the basis of the good life. Whereas Psalm 127 uses poetic imagery to illuminate the directives of the Lord, Psalm 128 is more like utilitarian prose than creative poetry. What we find here is practical instruction for entering the Promised Land. This psalm speaks to the common man. It would ring true for all of the laborers who have made the long pilgrimage to their homeland. Be it a shepherd, or the craftsman, the farmer or the merchant, all would hear the call to place the Lord first in their work, then watch the blessings flow.

There was no expectation that the exiles would find happiness in their journey, nor in their labors in reestablishing the homeland. They knew it would be hard, sometime grueling work. What they would find is blessing. The cause of happiness, according to the Psalmist, is found in the blessedness of our walk with the Lord: “Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.” Fear, as it is used here, is not terror, but rather reverence. It is the sense of standing in awe of God. The work in which the returnees were to engage was to be immersed in their worship of God. They were called to do the work as if for God alone: to “walk in His ways.” What we do in daily life must be done in awe of God, with hearts knit to God. The wisdom writer of the Book of Ecclesiasticus in the Apocrypha states this clearly, saying that these workers “will maintain the fabric of the world, and in the handiwork of their craft is their prayer” (Ecclus. 38:34). Would that we could all see our work as prayer to God.

Childbearing and childrearing is also a part of the work of these laborers in the Lord. But the fruitful vine mentioned in verse 3 is more than childbearing. It is all the ways a wife blesses her husband as listed in Proverbs 31. She is faithful, not just fruitful. She is not like the adulterous woman in Proverbs 7:11, whose feet do not stay at home. She embraces the dignity of marriage and motherhood with contentment. The picture the Psalmist paints is one which depicts that the basis for peace and tranquility within the home is nothing less than the fear of God.

Saturday of 3 Lent
March 26, 2022

The Lord bless you from Zion!
Psalm 128

“The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life!” —Psalm 128:5

“No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were. Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” (John Donne, *Meditation 17*)

The man who fears the Lord is blessed. But he does not keep those blessings for himself. He extends his interests beyond himself and his family. He seeks blessing for his community and for the whole people of God. He is “a part of the main”. The promise of the preceding verses of Psalm 128 becomes a prayer for blessing on all of Jerusalem. The man of faith knows that. He knows that his own welfare is tied up in the welfare of the whole community. Once again the prayer for Israel’s welfare is repeated because the hopes of all that fear the Lord center in Jerusalem, for all their springs are in her.

We are coming home. We are entering the New Jerusalem, and we cannot do it alone. We are the Body of Christ. The blessing of the Psalmist on his neighbors should be ours as we seek the Lord and His Promised Land. “The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life!” We are called to care for one another, to encourage one another, and to help one another along the way. St. Paul exhorted the Church at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:11) with these words: “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up.” We are also instructed to “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). And Paul tells the Church at Philippi (2:4), “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Whatever God has given to us is to be used “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). We do this so that we “may see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of our lives.”

“The Lord bless you from Zion!” Yes, so that you may be a blessing to others. In this seemingly endless time of change and turmoil in which we find ourselves today, we need each other more than ever. We need the blessings from Zion. But we need to share those blessings with friends, neighbors, bothers and sisters, and the strangers we meet on the street. We have entered into the New Jerusalem. Now let us look forward to the next challenge. How shall we live here? What would the Lord have us do in this place of blessing?

The Fourth Week of Lent Sunday, March 27, 2022

Making Jerusalem our Home

*“And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.
If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” —Galatians 5:24-25*

During this fourth week of Lent we will begin the work of making the New Jerusalem our home. The Lord has set us free, and we have entered into the fulness of life in Christ’s Kingdom, the New Jerusalem. But what are the demands upon us as we make our homes here? Paul says, in the verses quoted above that our passions and desires — our selfishness and self-will — must be crucified, and that we must begin to live and walk in the Spirit of God. We must be different. We have been living and walking in the way of the world. Now the challenge is to be like Christ. We have been working hard to get here to the Promised Land, but that is only the beginning. The goal is not to get to the New Jerusalem, but to live in the New Jerusalem.

As we observed in the meditation this past Thursday, our relationship with Christ is a marriage. Jesus is the bridegroom and the Body of Christ is the bride. This relationship is one that is intended to be joyful and filled with love. But as any married couple knows and comes to understand more fully over time, marriage takes work. When the exiles had successfully made their way back home to Jerusalem, they knew that their work had just begun. They had worked hard to get there, having traversed over hostile terrain, and having overcome physical, mental, and spiritual obstacles. But now, the work of making Jerusalem their home was ahead of them. And that would require hard work. Now that we have arrived at our destination in the New Jerusalem, we have work to do in order to make this marriage work. St. John gives us a glimpse of the great joy that we can expect when we have made the effort to embrace this marriage relationship. He says, “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure’—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints” (Rev. 19:7-8).

The righteous deeds of the saints. The right relationship with the Lord. That relationship will make us different from those of the world. We are not called to be at odds with those around us, but to be the very image of Christ, a light in the midst of the darkness. The Church is called to be a light upon the hill, beckoning to those living in darkness to come up to the banquet table of the Lord and feed on the fruit and blessings that flow from the Heart of God.

There is work to do. We all carry scars from our journey, and we must unlearn habits that we have picked up while in exile. God will give a new heart and a new spirit to all who seek Him. We can learn a new way of living. But it will take time and effort. It will take a penitent heart and a transformed mind. Then we can truly know the peace of Christ, and put our hope firmly in Him. So let us come together as One Body in Christ and make our home in the New Jerusalem.

Monday of 4 Lent
March 28, 2022

The Lord's Victory over the Wicked
Psalm 129

"The Lord is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked." —Psalm 129:4

Take a moment and read Psalm 129.

In the movie "Glory," about the first all-African-American regiment in the United States Army during the Civil War, there is a scene where a former slave is subjected to punishment by whipping. Private Trip, played by Denzel Washington, is stripped of his coat and shirt, and as he drops his shirt we can see the numerous welts across his back from previous whippings. They look like long furrows in a plowed field. This would not have been an unfamiliar sight to the exiles having made the journey to Jerusalem. Many of the Jews who had been taken captive to Babylon were made slaves of their captors, and many were subjected to harsh treatment. As the Psalmist says in Psalm 129:3, "The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows." Their backs may have looked like Private Trip's.

We have entered the New Jerusalem, but many of us are carrying scars from our time in captivity to the flesh, the world, and the devil. However, like the Psalmist affirms, though we may be carrying the scars inflicted by the wicked, "yet they have not prevailed against us." These past afflictions hold no power over us. And those who inflicted harm on us in the past cannot harm us again if we stay firmly rooted in the Lord. For, "the Lord is righteous; He has cut the cords of the wicked."

As we shall see in tomorrow's meditation, this Psalmist is both hurt and angry. He lashes out with curses upon those who brought about this woe. That is not an uncommon practice in the Old Testament, and sadly, as we saw in the meditation on Tuesday of 2 Lent, it is something that all of us are tempted to do ourselves. But we have been born again into a new identity in Christ Jesus. We have come into the New Jerusalem through the body and shed blood of Jesus—a body that was whipped, and spit upon, crowned with thorns, nailed to a cross, and pierced with a sword. And as Jesus hung from that cross, did He curse those who abused Him? No. He prayed for them. This is a challenge for us.

The first part of this psalm is a hymn of trust. It is an affirmation that God has protected us, and will continue to be with us. We can put our trust in Him. This deliverance at the hands of the Lord from persecution is a sign of the Lord's favor. Psalm 41:11 says, "I know that you are pleased with me, for my enemy does not triumph over me." As we begin to make our home in Christ Jesus, in His New Jerusalem, we have full assurance that if we abide in Him, His favor will rest upon us and the enemy will never triumph over us. "The Lord is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked." Let us stand firm in that faith, confident that the Lord will show us His favor.

Tuesday of 4 Lent
March 29, 2022

Blessings on Zion, Shame on Her Enemies

“May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward!” —Psalm 129:5

There is a story that I heard many years ago about a banker who, each evening on his way to the bus stop for his ride home, would pass by a homeless man living in a cardboard box. The man wore threadbare clothes, a thin blanket wrapped about his shoulders, and a can with a sign propped against it reading, “Hungry, please help”. The banker would put a coin or a bill in the man’s can each time he passed, but nothing ever seemed to change for the man. One day, the banker decided to take a different approach. He purchased a \$100 gold coin from the bank, and when he came to the man’s box, he saw that the homeless man was asleep. So, rather than put the coin in the can where someone might steal it, he put it in the man’s pocket. The next evening as he approached, again nothing seemed to have change. The man had on the same ratty clothes, the sign leaning against the can still read, “Hungry, please help.” The banker asked the man, “Did you not cash in that coin I gave you?” “What coin?” came the reply. “It’s in your pocket,” said the banker. The homeless man reached in his pocket and pulled out the gold coin. He looked at the banker and said, “I didn’t know it was there.”

God’s blessings are always there. In Ephesians 1:3, Paul says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” God HAS BLESSED us in Christ with EVERY spiritual blessing. It is a done deal. But many of us live as if we are completely oblivious to those blessings. Even though we are residents of the New Jerusalem, living in Christ’s paradise, too often we live as if our home is no better than a cardboard box. We are waiting for blessings that are already there, but we are not actively seeking Christ and His love in the everyday things of this world.

As mentioned in yesterday’s meditation, the latter part of Psalm 129 is what is known as an imprecatory psalm. It is a curse upon those who would do harm to the righteous. These reproaches and curses that we find in Holy Scripture may make us uncomfortable, but we must acknowledge that these are honest expressions of what is in the human heart. Jesus said that “from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness” (Mark 7:21). That is a nasty collection of things. And though we may want to deny that we are holding onto all of this unpleasantness, nevertheless, these thoughts are there. The Psalmist has simply expressed what all of us feel from time to time. But in Psalm 129, the imprecation is stated in the negative. He is saying, the blessings are there for the wicked as well as for the righteous, but these blessings are simply not received by the wicked. The wicked have absented themselves from the flow of God’s grace. They are oblivious to the presence of God’s love and favor, because they have chosen to turn their backs on Him. There is a gold coin in their pocket, but they aren’t looking for it.

As a Song of Ascent, this psalm is well-suited to remind us that as we walk the pilgrim way and begin to make our home in the Lord, we are never to take our blessings and privileges for granted. May the Lord give us grace to be receptive when we hear, “The blessing of the Lord be upon you! We bless you in the name of the Lord!” And let us thank the Lord for His abundant provision of blessings.

Wednesday of 4 Lent
March 30, 2022

Prayers of Repentance
Psalm 130

“But with [the Lord] there is forgiveness...” —Psalm 130:4

Take a moment and read Psalm 130.

Have you ever hit your thumb with a hammer? It hurts. But it doesn't just hurt the small injured appendage. The pain shoots up your arm and rattles around in your brain. Your whole hand and arm tingle with pain. It's as if your whole body is alight with the fire. What happens to one part of the body affects the whole. One of the great truths about making our home in the Lord, our dwelling in the New Jerusalem, is that we are called to live with others. As St. Paul reminds us, “we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5). Whatever we do in the Body of Christ, therefore, affects not ourselves alone, but everyone who dwells with us in the New Jerusalem.

Psalm 130 is an individual lament, expressing penitence and trust in God's mercy. And though it is written in the first person singular, it is a cry of repentance for the whole people of Israel. The penitential element of this psalm is geared toward helping the new inhabitants of the Promised Land to see themselves as forgiven people, whose only right to enter God's presence lies in His mercy. “And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.”

The call is to repentance, a cleansing of all the people, that we may live together in harmony. And so, we repent for ourselves, yes, but also on behalf of the whole Body of Christ. Both Ezra the priest, and Daniel the prophet recognized the need for this corporate repentance before the land could be properly settled. Daniel cried to the Lord: “O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill, because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and your people have become a byword among all who are around us” (Dan 9:16). Ezra prayed, “From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt... But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving... to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem” (Ezra 10:7-9).

The challenge of dwelling in the New Jerusalem is to move from self will into God's will, to turn our attention from the things of this world and onto the way of life in Christ Jesus. Our desire should be to seek to be transformed into the sorts of people who live lives of grace in Christ. Through baptism we were born into Zion, we were made citizens of the New Jerusalem, but we have been separated from the land of our birth by our sin. It was a long journey to get here, but the work has just begun. Living in the New Jerusalem requires a new heart and a new attitude, a different set of skills than we possessed and employed while living in exile. Repentance is key. We will get distracted from time to time and will return to our old ways of living. We need to be held accountable. We need each other to build ourselves up. And we need to be patient, compassionate, and understanding of one another. Not tolerating sin, but loving the sinner. And repenting for ourselves and the whole Body of Christ.

Thursday of 4 Lent
March 31, 2022

My Soul Waits for the Lord
Psalm 130

“My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning...” —Psalm 130:6

There is a phenomenon called the overview effect which everyone who has traveled in outer space has experienced. Once an astronaut has escaped the atmosphere and is able to look back upon the earth, his or her perspective is dramatically altered. One common theme is, “there are no lines.” The space farer cannot see the artificial boundaries that we create and draw on our maps. Another is that the planet itself looks small and vulnerable. When Neil Armstrong set foot on the Moon and looked back at the earth he said, “It suddenly struck me that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet Earth. I didn’t feel like a giant. I felt very, very small.” There is a sense among all of those who have shared this experience that things which we have considered important, even essential, to our lives, fade in the light of this new perspective.

As we make our home in the New Jerusalem, we all need a transformed perspective. We need an overview effect so that we can begin to see the world around us, and those who live in it, from the perspective of God. We need to see the lines that we have drawn between ourselves and others disappear, and see the other as God sees him or her.

One of the reasons it is important to take time to pause and immerse ourselves in quiet time with God, whether it is a spiritual retreat at a monastery, or simply a regularly scheduled silent time apart from the hectic busyness of daily life, is that it helps us get that perspective. As I am writing this meditation, I am on a “retreat”. But this retreat is VERY different from any other I have taken. I am at home. Because of the pandemic, the monastery is not fully open to guests, and it has been that way for two years. Yet, I needed this time away, to get silent, to be with God and hear His voice. I needed, like the Psalmist, to “wait for the Lord.” It is not ideal, but it is quiet time with the Lord, a waiting upon Him.

In verses 5 and 6 of Psalm 130, the Psalmist is declaring that he puts his trust in God’s forgiveness. He knows that help will come from the Lord, and from no other source. Three times in those two verses the Psalmist declares, “I wait for the Lord.” Dwelling in the New Jerusalem demands a transformed heart and a change in perspective. That transformation is an on-going process, and requires patience and accountability. We cannot see ourselves objectively, and so we need to be able to be held accountable to our brothers and sisters in Christ for how we are living our life in Christ. And we need to wait patiently on the Lord as He works His change in us.

One of my prayers during this retreat is that, at this time in our history when tensions are high and those invisible dividing lines which we draw between our selves and our neighbors have become more numerous and distinct, God will give me an overview effect. That I may see those around me with the eyes of Christ. That I may see, with the eyes of Christ, the harried store clerk, the impatient driver, those who differ from me politically, economically, socially, even theologically. God give me the eyes to see them with the Love that you have for them. May the dividing wall of hostility disappear, and may I love them with the Love that you have shown for me. Like the watchman who awaits the dawn, may my soul wait for the Lord to show His mercy. In Him we can all put our hope.

Friday of 4 Lent
April 1, 2022

Walking Humbly with Our God
Psalm 131

*“O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.” —Psalm 131:1*

Take a moment and read Psalm 131.

In A.D. 476 the Roman Empire fell. And into the chaotic morass that followed its fall St. Benedict moved to Rome. He relocated there in the late fifth century in hopes of receiving an academic education. But seeing the depravity of that fallen world he set about to live differently—to live his life in Christ. Over time others were attracted to his way of life and he formed the community that became the Order of Saint Benedict. Members of the Order live according to a simple rule based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And as the Rule of St. Benedict instructs, “Your way of acting should be different from worldly ways” (RSB 4:20).

Our lives are filled with potential worldly distractions. There is the internet, the worldwide web, social media, and the 24/7 news cycle. We carry the world on our hip or in our purse in the form of a smart phone. We cannot imagine being without immediate access to unlimited sources of information—information which may or may not be accurate. We have come to believe that the aphorism which Francis Bacon made famous in the sixteenth century is absolutely true: “knowledge is power.” But we are residents of the New Jerusalem. The only knowledge that brings absolute truth and ultimate power is the knowledge of God. Solomon said of God, “For to know you is complete righteousness, and to know your power is the root of immortality” (Wisdom 15:3). Some would say that we NEED to follow the news, that it is important for us to know what is going on in the world. But at what cost? Following secular news will provide us with a secular perspective. Our focus will be diverted from the heart of God to the mind of the world. This preoccupation then becomes a source of stress. It takes a toll on our hearts, minds, and bodies. How much time do you spend on the internet? How much time do you spend watching cable or network news? How much time do you spend on social media? And . . . how much time do you spend in the Word, prayer, and quiet time with God?

The Psalmist recognized that preoccupation with matters beyond his control was detrimental to his well-being. He recognized that his preoccupation must be in his relationship with God, pursuing God’s will. “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.” The Psalmist might know what the governor’s decisions were, but he didn’t spend time questioning those decisions. He relished participation in communal worship, but was not overly concerned about which scrolls were read or songs were sung. He knew the walls were not completely restored, but he knew his part in that effort, and applied himself only to that work. It is simply a question of humility, not worrying about things beyond his control. When Micah prophesied to the Jews, he declared, “. . . what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8).

Dwelling in the New Jerusalem means that we are to live in the world, but not in worldly ways. Our hope is not found in political decisions or technological inventions. We find our hope in God rather than in things of this world. Then we can say with the Psalmist, “But I have calmed and quieted my soul. . .”

Saturday of 4 Lent
April 2, 2022

Hope in the Lord Forevermore
Psalm 131

“O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.” —Psalm 131:3

The Lord has set us free, and we have entered into the fulness of life in Christ’s Kingdom, the New Jerusalem. But what are the demands upon us as we make our homes here? Paul tells the church at Galatia (Galatians 5:24-25) that our passions and desires — our selfishness and self-will — must be crucified, and that we must begin to live and walk in the Spirit of God. We must be different. We are called to live our lives in Christ. Our lives should look like the life of Jesus. By the grace and presence of the Holy Spirit we are being transformed into the Image of Christ. Jesus came to do the will of His Father. He said, “I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30). We have been living and walking in the way of the world. Now the challenge is to be like Christ—to wed our will to His. We have been working hard to get here to the Promised Land, but that is only the beginning. The goal is not to get to the New Jerusalem, but to live in the New Jerusalem.

What the Psalmist is saying in today’s Psalm is that we are to “hope *in* the Lord”. This is not hoping that the Lord will do something for us, but that we may become more and more yielded to His will for our lives. That we may become like Him in righteousness. The returning exiles’ lives have been totally disrupted, but now they have made their way to their permanent home. And without the Lord, there would be no way to rebuild their homes and their lives. They needed to let go of the past and move forward with their eyes firmly fixed on the Lord.

As has been noted throughout these meditations, our world, our situation, is not significantly different from the world of those singing the Songs of Ascent. In the midst of the disruption in our world there has been a lot of noise about rights and freedom. For most of those making the demands to exercise their “rights”, they are simply voicing their desire to do their own will. But Jesus makes His own demands on His disciples. To the rich young ruler He said, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21). And to the wider crowd Jesus said, “So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). And after prophesying His Passion, Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). We are called to leave everything and follow Him; not just our possessions, but our past, our hurts, our prejudices, even our own will. We are to put our hope, our very lives *in* the life of Christ.

In that leaving, letting go of the things of this world is our hope in the Lord. The prophet Ezekiel, speaking to the exiles, gave them the Lord’s promise: “I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Ezekiel 36:24-28). That is our hope for life in the New Jerusalem.

The Fifth Week of Lent Sunday, April 3, 2022

Celebration and Worship

“Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her.” —Isaiah 66:10

Worship! Our unique calling as the gathered people of God is to worship. When we come together as one body, the focus of our gathering is the worship of the One who has made us one. This is our identity. We are worshipers of the One True God. In these Songs of Ascent we have witnessed our pilgrimage from exile to freedom in Christ. We made the journey, entered Zion, and established our home here with Him. But it was not by our own power. God Himself has birthed within us the desire to come home. He gave us the will to persevere, and He alone deserves honor. This is His home, His resting place, and He has made the Way for us to live in Him. The only appropriate response is for us to worship Him.

When the returning exiles had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, and the Temple had been restored, Nehemiah the governor called for the people of God to come together and celebrate. He said, “At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem we sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres... Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks... So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me... And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away” (12:27-43).

As we come toward the conclusion of our Lenten pilgrimage and the final three Songs of Ascent, it is time to lift our voices in praise of the One who has delivered us from exile and brought us home to dwell with Him. God has cared for us every step of the way. He has provided for our every need. Now it is time for us to give thanks. The prophet Isaiah exhorted the exiles to rejoice together, and give thanks. For if we make Zion our home, we will know the peace and comfort that comes from God alone. He will be our God, and we shall be His people. The prophet says:

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her;
that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance.

For thus says the Lord:

“Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river,
and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip, and bounced upon her knees.

As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.
You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bones shall flourish like the grass;
and the hand of the Lord shall be known to his servants,
and he shall show his indignation against his enemies.” (Isaiah 66:10-14)

Let us rejoice and give thanks with the Psalmists as we sing together these final Songs of Ascent.

Monday of 5 Lent
April 4, 2022

Celebrating the Return to the Temple
Psalm 132

*“Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool!
Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your saints shout for joy.” —Psalm 132:7,9*

Take a moment and read Psalm 132.

The overriding theme of this royal psalm is God’s covenant with the house of David (2 Sam. 7:4-16) to establish the dynasty for the good of the people, and eventually, to bring the world into covenant with the Lord. Most of the psalm expresses confidence in these promises, and the requests in the psalm are for God to carry out his purpose. As a Song of Ascent, this psalm recalls how the dynasty of David was established to ensure the stability of the realm, especially stability for the restored Jerusalem.

Psalm 132 is a liturgical song to be sung in procession as the faithful enter into the Temple of the Lord. The first half of the psalm, verses 1 through 9, is sung outside the doors as the people make their way toward the Holy Place. The remaining verses, 10 through 18, are sung after the congregation has made their way into the courts of the Temple. This is a re-enactment of King David’s celebration as the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem and the king danced before the Lord. The Psalmist is recalling the past in order to encourage and inform the present, and to pave the way for future generations to remain faithful to the covenant and to the worship of the Lord in His holy Temple.

But what about the Ark of the Covenant? There is no record of what became of the Ark when Jerusalem was conquered, the Temple destroyed, and the Jews were taken into exile in Babylon. The first book of Esdras (1:54) says that the Babylonians “took all the holy vessels of the Lord, both great and small, with the vessels of the Ark of God, and the king’s treasures, and carried them away into Babylon.” But it doesn’t mention the Ark itself. In Rabbinic literature the final disposition of the Ark is disputed. Some rabbis hold that it must have been carried off to Babylon, while others hold that faithful priests and Levites under King Josiah hid the Ark. Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Shimon state that the Ark was, in fact, taken into Babylon. Rabbi Yehudah, dissenting, says that the Ark was stored away in its own place, meaning somewhere on the Temple Mount. But the Ark of the Covenant had been taken captive before, by the Philistines, during the days of Samuel. When the Ark was brought back from the Philistines, Scripture says, “As soon as the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded” (1 Samuel 4:5). It seems likely that after the return from exile, the Ark was restored to the Temple from wherever it had been hidden. And the Psalmist is recording the celebration accompanying its return to the Temple as the “saints shout for joy”.

For those of us who have made our home in the New Jerusalem, we can join with the ones singing this Song of Ascent and “shout for joy.” As Patrick Reardon summarizes for us in his book *Christ in the Psalms*, “The Church reads all such texts as prophecies of course, finding their fulfillment solely in Christ our Lord. He is at once the new Temple and that very son of David who gives defining substance to God’s covenant sworn to the son of Jesse. When we pray this psalm, it is entirely with reference to its fulfillment in Jesus, *the Anointed One and the Temple*” (p. 264).

Tuesday of 5 Lent
April 5, 2022

Clothing The Saints With Garments of Praise
Psalm 132

*“For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place:
Her priests I will clothe with salvation, and her saints will shout for joy.” —Psalm 132:13,16*

I would be a lousy poker player. My mother often told me that I wear my emotions on my sleeve. As a youngster I didn't understand what that meant, but over time it became clear that she meant that I displayed my emotions openly in public rather than hiding them from other people. If I was angry, sad, happy, perturbed, whatever, you would know it. I've been told I have not changed with age. So, I never play poker. In verse 9 of today's psalm, the Psalmist prays, “Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your saints shout for joy.” And in verse 16 God declares that “Her priests I will clothe with salvation, and her saints will shout for joy.” The sense of these two verses is that the priests of the Temple will openly practice righteousness, which is a change from the practices of the Temple priests before the exile, and that the people will see this change and recognize the salvation which has come to all of the returnees to Jerusalem. The priests will wear righteousness and salvation on their sleeves. It will all be on display in the Holy City, and “her saints will shout for joy.”

As was noted yesterday, this is a liturgical psalm used in procession to the Temple. The first half is sung on the way to worship, and the second half is sung once the congregation has gathered in the courtyard of the Temple. The faithful have prayed for provision, and God has provided. Now God promises that to the blessings of food, shelter, even life itself, He will add those blessings pertaining to godliness. He, in essence says, “I will clothe My Temple priests with salvation, with My saving graces and blessings, and with the righteousness you have requested.” This is the promise of renewal and fulfillment of the Davidic covenant hoped for in the early verses of the psalm. And this fulfillment would be realized in the Person and ministry of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus visited the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth, he read the first portion of Isaiah 61. After reading that messianic prophecy, He handed the scroll back to the attendant and shocked everyone by saying, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). That passage from Isaiah, which was prophesied to the exiles after their return, goes on to talk about how God will clothe His people. The prophecy says, “to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit” (61:3). Jesus boldly proclaimed that He was the One who would take away the spirit of despair and give the garment of praise. And in Him the promises of Psalm 132 are fulfilled.

That is a reason for those of us who have come into the New Jerusalem to shout for joy. St. Paul exhorts the Church at Philippi to “rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (4:4). And to the Church at Thessalonica he says, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (5:16-18). Life in the New Jerusalem is life in Jesus, the Son of David. “The Lord has chosen Zion... and her saints will shout for joy.”

Wednesday of 5 Lent
April 6, 2022

The Unity of the Body
Psalm 133

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” —Psalm 133:1

Take a moment and read Psalm 133.

Families can be difficult. Living in close proximity with others, whether blood relatives or not, can test our patience. Unhappy divisions can lead to discord, and sadly, to broken homes, divorce, or worse. Even less dramatic conflict can lead to familial disunity. I have been alienated from one of my two sisters for more than half my life. It is a source of great sorrow for me. But the Psalmist says in the opening verse of this Song of Ascent, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” It is the goal for all of God’s people to dwell together in love and charity toward one another. And the psalm uses two beautiful similes to describe the blessedness of Israel being true to her calling to be one people in communion with the One God. The Psalmist describes this prized unity as “precious oil poured on the head,” and like “the dew of Hermon falling on Mount Zion.”

As was presented in Sunday’s meditation, our calling as God’s people is to worship. When we come together in unity, we can worship the One who seeks to make us one. When we argue, bicker, fight with one another, demanding our own way, we inhibit the worship that God so richly deserves. The solidarity of the family and community is fundamental to our worship. This is why it is important for couples contemplating marriage to be of one mind in their choice of faith. The unity of a couple in their worship of God is crucial for the stability of the home, and by extension the stability of the Church. As Andrew Greeley said, in his book *Faithful Attraction*, “prayer is the most intimate act in marriage. It is more intimate than the marital embrace. In prayer, we bear our innermost feelings to God and our spouse. There is nothing more powerful in binding a couple together in a life-long marital bond.”

While in exile the Jews had nowhere to turn for a unifying symbol of God’s Presence. The lack of the Temple as the dwelling place of God had a serious detrimental effect on families and the community of the faithful. But now, with the restoration of the people of God to the Holy Land, and the rebuilding of the Temple, the dissolving of family structure during the exile is overcome by unity found in the Lord. Corporate worship has been restored, and the practice of the faith is rekindled in the family homes.

How good and pleasant it is when the families can joyfully assemble with the larger family of the Church to praise and worship the One who has made us one in Him. And how good and pleasant it is when families of the faithful come together to honor Him in their homes in worship as wholesome families.

Thursday of 5 Lent
April 7, 2022

United Under the Lord's Blessing
Psalm 133

"For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore." —Psalm 133:3

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was interviewed on the television show, *Meet the Press*, on April 17, 1960. In that interview he made the following statement about the Church: "I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated of hours, in Christian America. I definitely think the Christian church should be integrated, and any church that stands against integration and that has a segregated body is standing against the spirit and the teachings of Jesus Christ, and it fails to be a true witness." Divisions in the Church, though, go far beyond racial discrimination. Sadly, the disunity of the Body of Christ is in great evidence throughout the world. Here in Asheville, many attempts have been made to bring the various churches together for united worship. At an organizational meeting for a pastors' prayer summit, the divisions became glaringly obvious. There was one pastor who said that there could be no praying in tongues or he would leave. Another said unless all Scripture readings were from the King James Bible he would not come. One pastor pointed at me and asked if I was Catholic, adding "I won't pray with a heretic." There are liturgical churches and non-liturgical, sacramental and non-sacramental, infant baptizers and believer baptizers, Catholic, Protestant, and Messianic Jew. And, sadly, never shall they meet under one roof.

The Psalmist said, "how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" But how is that ever going to happen when we argue about and emphasize our differences. Coming together in the New Jerusalem we can hear the words of this Psalm, "For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore." So much of what divides us is cultural, not Scriptural. We are afraid of losing what we think of as our unique identity. We identify with the denomination instead of seeking our identity in the Lord Jesus Himself. But what is the cure for this disunity? Brian Zahnd, in his book *Postcards from Babylon*, says, "Those who feed on faith, hope, and love stand out in a culture characterized by fear; they are distinguished by the healthy glow of a robust peace." This is what the Psalmist is pointing toward in his call to worship in Psalm 133. This Song of Ascent is calling to the returning Jews to focus on the Lord and worship in His restored Temple. The One True God, and He alone, is the heart of our unity as the People of God. It is not doctrine, but dominion that unites us. The Dominion of God. His dwelling place. His Jerusalem.

It is in the New Jerusalem that the dividing walls of hostility between believers are broken down. The Spirit unites, and the brotherhood of the faithful without schism or rivalries can come together in peace and unity. This was the vision that St. John witnessed on the island of Patmos. He said, "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Revelation 7:9-10). Let us thank God that this is a present reality in the New Jerusalem. And when we dwell there, we can know that joy and peace.

Friday of 5 Lent
April 8, 2022

A Liturgy of Blessing
Psalm 134

“Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord.” —Psalm 134:1

Take a moment and read Psalm 134.

We have made it to Jerusalem. We have entered the city, rebuilt the walls, and made Zion our home. The Temple has been restored. And the Lord has declared His blessing over Zion. The congregation has come together in worship and praise, and now it is time for everyone to make their way back to their homes to find rest and refreshment with their family. The Songs of Ascent have come to their conclusion. And what could be a better conclusion than Our Lord’s benediction from Zion.

Psalm 134 is a liturgical psalm, once again in the form of a versicle and response. Verses 1 and 2 are sung by the congregation. Verse 3 is sung in response by the priests—a benediction emanating from the Temple. The Lord is sending the worshipers to their respective homes after a fruitful day of praise and worship. The evening has come and it is time for families to retire for the night. St. Benedict called for this psalm to be said every night at Compline, the final service of the Liturgy of the Hours. There could be no more fitting conclusion to a day of worship and walking with the Lord.

“Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord,” the people cry out to one another. Some Christians have trouble understanding what it means to “Bless the Lord”. Is it not, they say, the Lord who blesses us? Yes. But it is the Lord who is blessed when His people come joyfully together and celebrate Him and His goodness toward us. It is like the joy of a proud parent seeing his or her children relishing life and sharing that joy with them. For us to “Bless the Lord” means that we praise Him with words that declare His greatness and goodness. He is richly blessed when His children rejoice in Him. And so the Psalmist exhorts the people to “Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord!” And the Psalmist, and many centuries later, St. Paul, exhort the faithful to pray with holy hands uplifted. The Psalmist says, “Lift up your hands...and bless the Lord!” And Paul instructs, “I want men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands...” (1 Tim. 2:8).

As noted above, Benedict calls for this Psalm to be prayed every night at Compline. And in the service of Compline in the *Book of Common Prayer* you will find this psalm as one of the psalms appointed for that office. What better way to conclude a day than to put all of the events, thoughts, victories, and troubles of the day into the hands of the Lord. In that relinquishment of the day we can find peace for the night ahead.

Saturday of 5 Lent
April 9, 2022

The Blessing of the Lord From Zion
Psalm 134

“May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!” —Psalm 134:3

The blessing of the Lord is that we may dwell with Him. Zion is the Lord’s dwelling place, His blessing emanates from there, and those who receive His blessing respond to His call and come to dwell with Him in Zion. “For God will save Zion and build up the cities of Judah, and people shall dwell there and possess it; the offspring of his servants shall inherit it, and those who love his name shall dwell in it” (Psalm 69:35-36). The last line from this final Song of Ascent is not only a petition, “May the Lord bless you...”, but an awesome promise. We have made the journey out of exile. We have been welcomed into the dwelling place of the King (Rev. 21:3). We have been adopted as sons and daughters of the King (Romans 8:14-17). Now we are called to reign as priests and kings (Rev. 5:9-10), even though we were but dust and ashes (Gen. 18:27). Now we are dwelling and reigning with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:16). The God who “made heaven and earth”, the creator of all things including the New Jerusalem and us as the people of God, has made us worthy to dwell with Him. And He alone, therefore, is worthy of all worship, our King and our God.

Take encouragement from the words that the prophet Isaiah (30:18-21) delivered to those were taken into exile in Babylon. “Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him. For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you. And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.” And the prophet Zechariah (8:3) encouraged those who made it back to Zion and were rebuilding the city. He said, “Thus says the Lord: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain.”

Zion, the New Jerusalem, is our home! God has prepared it for us, and He has prepared us to dwell with Him. He blesses us from Zion. His blessing is that we will dwell with Him in His dwelling place forever.

Holy Week Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022

A Kingdom and Priests

“And they sang a new song to the Lamb, saying, ...by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”
—Revelation 5:9-10

Our pilgrimage is nearly complete. We have made it to Jerusalem. We are dwelling in Zion. We have come home to the Lord and now we are preparing to walk with Jesus in His way. And His way is the way of the Cross. His way takes us through Holy Week on the *via Dolorosa*, the way of sorrows, into the light, the joy, and new life in the Resurrection. In this final week of our Lenten pilgrimage, during this Holy Week, we will meditate on what it means for us as Christians to truly be residents of the New Jerusalem. What does the New Jerusalem look like? How do we make our home here? What does that home look like? It looks like Jesus. We make our home in Jesus. And He, by His blood, has made us “a kingdom and priests to our God, and *we* shall reign on the earth.”

We, the Body of Christ, become a kingdom when we are united in the King. We are made priests when we share in His High Priesthood. We have been made a kingdom and priests by virtue of His saving act in the Passion we observe this Holy Week. St. John relates to the seven churches in Asia the revelation given to Him by Jesus. He says to them, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 1:6). It is by the blood of Jesus that we were “freed from our sins...and made a kingdom, priests to His God and Father.” But let this not go to our heads. We have no kingly authority, apart from the King. We have no priestly ministry without the Great High Priest. It is all about Jesus.

We have all heard, at one time or another, the saying, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” God didn’t choose them, He made them. He covenanted with the Hebrew people, taking a wandering band of twelve tribes and uniting them as one people. God made them into His one chosen people at Sinai. In His covenant promise to them through Moses, He said, “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6). And God eternally sealed this covenant in the blood of His Son, Jesus. So, when we pray for His kingdom to come, we are praying that His will be done in us, that we “will indeed obey His voice and keep His covenant.”

This is Palm Sunday. We have been exhorted throughout our pilgrimage to be different from the world. What we see on Palm Sunday is a prophetic parade announcing the arrival of an alternative empire—the kingdom of God. This kingdom, those who reign in Jesus, derives its power by embracing the cross and fulfilling the will of God. It is the only hope the world has for true liberation, freedom from exile in sin. It’s all about Jesus. Jesus the Way. Jesus the Light. Jesus, the One in whom we dwell. Jesus the New Jerusalem. Holy Week is Jesus.

Monday of Holy Week
April 11, 2022

Jesus is the Way

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” — John 14:6

A young lady came to me in great distress. She was unsure of her salvation. With tears, she asked, “Am I going to go to heaven?” I gave her a hug and asked her, “Are you living there now?” When Jesus told his disciples that He is the Way, He was not pointing to an after-life experience. He is with us, and we dwell in Him. He said, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (John 14:7). From NOW on you know Him. That knowing is an intimate relational knowing, like a wife and a husband intimately knowing one another. Are you going to heaven? Are you living there now?

To know Jesus, the Way, we must make Him the priority in our lives, to live for Him, to live in Him. As Christians living in this secular world, as we have seen during this pilgrimage, it is often difficult to keep our focus on Christ. There are many potential distractions. How are we handling these distractions? What efforts are we making to live differently from the world? What are our daily habits and routines? Are there things we do on a daily basis to draw us closer to Christ? Are our lives reflecting the kingdom values of the King? Are the things we are doing bringing worth to the Great High Priest? It is a question of our rule of life. What are our priorities? What is the “way” we are following?

A “rule of life” is not simply a monastic discipline. Everyone has a rule of life. What is your daily routine? Think about what you do when you rise from sleep. What preparations do you make for the day? What are the things that you do at work, school, or around the house? What is your evening routine? How do you close out your day? Where is Jesus in that daily routine? Is He your first thought of the day? Do you talk to Him, listen to Him, before you make your morning breakfast? Is His plan for your day your priority? Do you take time for Him through the hours of the day? Do you commend the day’s events, triumphs, and tragedies to Him before retiring for the night? Is His Kingdom your priority on a daily basis? Is He the Way you walk in your daily life? How you live your life—that is your rule of life. Everyone has a rule of life. What is the source of your rule? What is the focus of your life?

It’s all about Jesus. Jesus is the One who has “made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father.” Jesus is the Way. When we walk with Him, dwell in His Kingdom, we honor Him. Our lives in the New Jerusalem should reflect our place as citizens of this Holy City. When we live our lives in Christ, when we live a rule of life that makes Jesus and His will our daily priority, then to Him will “be glory and dominion forever and ever.”

Tuesday of Holy Week April 12, 2022

Jesus is the Light

“Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’” —John 8:12

“While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.” —John 12:36

One of the great joys I have is studying the night sky, the heavenly sights our Lord provides for all who are willing to look up. A number of years ago as I was watching the International Space Station make its way overhead, my phone rang. It was a parishioner who was outside looking for the ISS. She described what she saw and asked if that bright object zipping across the sky was truly the station. I assured her that it was. She said, “It’s so bright!” I asked her if she knew what it was she was looking at. She stuttered a moment then said, “I’m not sure.” “The station has no outside lighting,” I explained. “What you are seeing is the Sun reflected off of the huge solar panels.” All of the manmade objects in space and all of the planets are reflectors. None of them produce their own light. The Moon is probably the best example for us of the Sun’s power to be reflected. We were reminded on Ash Wednesday that we are dust. The Moon is simply a hunk of rock, and as we saw when the Apollo astronauts scooted about on the lunar surface, it is covered in dust. The Moon has no brightness in itself, it can only reflect the light of the Sun. But the Moon does reflect the Sun brilliantly. It is the second brightest object in the sky after only the Sun itself. We are dust, and we are called to reflect the light and glory of God. We have no brightness in ourselves, but we can be, like the Moon, reflectors of God’s glory.

The secular world is mired in darkness, and has been for some time. We have had two years of some of the most intense spiritual darkness in our lifetime. But we don’t walk in darkness because we walk in Christ! We are children of the light and have the Light of Life living in us. And, though we are dust, we are reflectors of God’s glory and light. Jesus said, “While you have the light, believe in the light.” This is not call to an intellectual assent, it is a knitting of our hearts to the heart of the One who is the Light of the World. It does no good to point out to others how dark things are around us. They don’t need that reminder; they need the Light of Christ. We are called to be bearers of the light. We believe in the light in order to be sons of light, children who look like the one who has brought us to new life. When in Him we are reborn, we become sons and daughters of the One who is Light Himself.

In the early chapters of his prophecy, Isaiah prophesied to the Jews who were living in the dark and evil times before the exile. The Lord had shown him what trials lay ahead for Israel. But he was also a messenger of hope. He prophesied, “The light of Israel will become a fire, and his Holy One a flame...” (Isaiah 10:17). There is a message there for us in these trying times. We can not kindle the fire. We are not the light. But the One who is the Light of the World, will kindle a flame in His People, and bring light to those who walk in darkness. Isaiah also gives this exhortation, “Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God” (Isaiah 50:10). The only way out of the darkness is Jesus. He is the Light.

We are the Body of Christ. His Body is the Temple, and Jesus Himself is the one who brings light and life to that Temple. He is the lamp, that eternal flame that burns night and day before the throne of God (Revelation 21:22-25). Let us reflect that light that others may see their way through the darkness into the Light of God, that they too may know the Way and the Light of Christ.

Wednesday of Holy Week April 13, 2022

Jesus Dwells with Us

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” —John 1:14

Many years ago, when I was in the Episcopal Church, I was one of the spiritual directors on a Cursillo weekend. During the weekend, one of the other spiritual directors was giving a talk on the Real Presence of Christ. He pointed out that when the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Jesus is in the tabernacle, it is appropriate to genuflect—to go down on one knee—before the Lord’s Presence. However, when the Sacrament is removed from tabernacle and displayed in a monstrance or a pyx on the Altar, it is appropriate to do a full solemn bow on both knees. He demonstrated how to do that. He then explained that when the King is on His throne and we can see Him face to face, we honor Him with a profound, humble bow. Then, Fr. Lee turned and fell on both knees before the gathered Cursillistas (the participants in the weekend), and bowed before them. He rose to his feet and said, “You are the Body of Christ. I can see the King face to face when I see you!” Later I told him that it was a powerful moment, that there were numerous shocked expressions on the faces of the people. He said, “Yeah, it’s kind of hokey, but it makes a legitimate point.”

We do honor the Lord when we genuflect before the sacrament. We drop to one knee whenever we pass before the tabernacle in the sanctuary. In the Scripture quoted above from John’s prologue, we know that Jesus dwells with us. The word John uses for “dwell” literally means He “pitched His tent with us.” There may have been in John’s mind a recollection of the tabernacle in the wilderness—the tent where the Ark of the Covenant resided. God pitched His tent with Israel. And in Jesus, He pitched His tent in the Person of His Son. The King is present with His people. Yes, He dwells with us!

Jesus told His disciples that, “You know him (the Spirit), for he dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:17). And St. Paul emphasized the fact that Christ dwells in us, saying, “I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Ephesians 3:14-17). Fr. Lee was right. We are bearers of the One who was made incarnate. Jesus dwells in us. And He fills us with His grace and truth. That is the Gospel. That is the Good News of life in the New Jerusalem.

Maundy Thursday April 14, 2022

The Living Bread

“I am the bread of life.” —John 6:35

It is Maundy Thursday. Tonight we celebrate the institution of the Lord’s Supper. In His love, Jesus gives us His Body and His Blood in our celebration of the Holy Eucharist. When we come to the Altar and receive the Sacrament, we receive the Bread of life, the Body of Jesus. Nutritionists will tell us that we need to be careful about what we eat. The 19th century French author Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin is credited with saying “You are what you eat.” He actually said, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.” Nevertheless, what we eat does change us, for either good or bad. What we eat can affect our physical, mental, and spiritual health. In the Holy Eucharist we have the greatest food of all, Jesus, the Bread that came down from heaven. When we receive the Holy Eucharist we become what we eat — His Body! Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin said, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.” Tell me that you eat the Body of Jesus, and I will tell you that you are being transformed into His likeness.

In St. John’s Gospel, the Apostle presents seven I Am statements given by Jesus to describe Himself. (I will append them to the end of this meditation.) It is highly appropriate that the first of these seven is this: “I am the bread of life...I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:35,51). The Eucharist is God’s chosen means for us to remain intimately in “communion” with Him. The word communion comes from the Latin meaning “participation in something as one; or that which is common to all.” St. Augustine said that communion comes from the Latin *com-* “together” and *unus* “one.” When we receive Communion—the Body of Christ—we are in communion with Him, and we all come together as one in Him. That is life in the New Jerusalem, living together as One Body in Jesus. We cannot live in the New Jerusalem without living our lives in Jesus. And it is in receiving the “Bread of Life which came down from Heaven” that we are drawn together in Him. He feeds us, nourishes us, heals us, and keeps us alive in His living bread, His Living Body. We NEED the Eucharist to maintain that communion with Him, and in Him with one another.

What does the New Jerusalem look like? As we noted on Sunday, it looks like Jesus. It looks like the Communion we share with Him and with one another in Him. The New Jerusalem comes alive in the Eucharistic banquet of the Lord where we come together as one in Jesus Christ.

Here is the list of those seven I AM statements in John’s Gospel:

- “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35)
- “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12).
- “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7).
- “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11).
- “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).
- “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).
- “I am the true vine” (John 15:1)

Good Friday April 15, 2022

The River of Life

*“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.”
—Revelation 22:1*

I had a friend and brother priest in Dallas who was accosted one day in downtown by a street preacher. This street evangelist asked Fr. Ted, “Have you been saved?” Fr. Ted enthusiastically replied, “Why yes indeed!” The preacher pressed further and asked, “And when was that? What day were you saved?” Without missing a beat, Fr. Ted said, “On a Friday afternoon 2000 years ago.” The adjective used in the title for this liturgical day is very important for our understanding of our place in the New Jerusalem. This is “Good” Friday. It is “Good” because it was on the Cross that Jesus secured our redemption by His Blood. It is on “Good” Friday that we all were saved! Scripture says that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22). His Blood shed on the Cross washed away our sins, and in His sacrifice we were cleansed and made whole. His Blood bought our forgiveness and so much more. Let’s look at what more that shed blood has done for us.

In the Revelation to John (22:1-5), Jesus shows the Apostle a vision of the New Jerusalem. John says, “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” This River of Life flows from the Throne. When Jesus was lifted up, the Cross became His Altar, His Throne, and upon that Altar the perfect sacrifice was offered.

St. John explains in his Gospel that at the Cross “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). And in his first epistle, John says, “Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood” (1 John 5:5-6). Just as the lambs were sacrificed on the altar in the Temple and the blood of the lamb was sprinkled upon the people, so too the Lamb of God was sacrificed on the Altar of the Cross and we receive His Blood in the Eucharist for the forgiveness of our sins. The River of Life flows from the Altar of the Cross. And note that “also, on either side of the river, is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

The River of Life is a river of life-giving water and blood. This river flows through the middle of the New Jerusalem. The throne of God and of the Lamb, the Cross of Jesus, is right in the middle of the city, and his servants worship him day and night. John says, “they will see his face, and his Name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” This is what makes Good Friday “Good”.

Holy Saturday **April 16, 2022**

Come to the New Jerusalem

*“The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’
And let the one who is thirsty come...” —Revelation 22:17*

Many years ago, when I would get frustrated with life, I would cry out, “Maranatha!” The word maranatha is a transliteration of the Aramaic word for “come” and Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians 16:22, where he says, “Our Lord, come!” When I would use the word in exasperation, Miranda would inevitably remind me that Jesus is not going to come on a rescue mission. When He comes again in glory He will be coming for a bride prepared for the Bridegroom! Revelation 19:7-8 tells us that Jesus is coming for a Bride who “has made herself ready”...and is clothed “with fine linen, bright and pure.” Jesus Himself tells us in the story of the wedding feast in Matthew 22:11, that the one who appears at the wedding without wedding garments is bound “hand and foot and cast into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” It is Jesus who clothes us. It is Jesus who prepares us for our life together in Zion. And He wants us to invite others into His New Jerusalem, that He may clothe them and have them live with Him in righteousness.

We do want the Lord to come again soon. But, as we have seen through these forty days, it is the Lord who is inviting us to come! He is ready, and it is His desire to clothe us in fine linen, the righteous deeds of the saints. He has called us and has brought us to the New Jerusalem. But as was pointed out on Ash Wednesday, Jerusalem and Zion are two terms for the same city. Zion indicates our unique relationship with God, while Jerusalem is a designation for the spiritual city reaching out to, and influencing the nations of the world. Jerusalem is the city from which God calls to those who are distant from Him. God created us, redeemed us, and has called us to come home to Zion, so that from this New Jerusalem we might reach out to the nations of the world and see them join us in His Heavenly City. He has called us to “Come”, and He is challenging us to call others to “Come”. Like Philip who said to Nathaniel when the latter had doubts, “Come and see” (John 1:46), we only need invite others to come and see the New Jerusalem. It is the Lord who will prepare them and clothe them.

The New Jerusalem was never intended to be for us alone. There are many who are desperate for the fulness of life found in the New Jerusalem. There are multitudes who are thirsty for the healing waters of the River of Life. The Bread of Life is for all of the hungry in the world. The Way of Life is for all who are lost. We are the Bride of Christ, and the Spirit of the Bridegroom within us is calling to all: “Come!” St. John gives us this word of exhortation at the end of his revelation: “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price...He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:17, 20).

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. Come and clothe us in the wedding garments that You have prepared for us, that we may live with You and rejoice always in our marriage to You. Come, Lord Jesus, that we may live with You and one another in the New Jerusalem.

May the Risen Christ be with you always. Amen.