

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Second Sunday of Advent; December 6, 2015

“Jerusalem Home (*Reprise*)”

Scripture: Baruch 5:1-9; Luke 3:1-6

Jerusalem. What is Jerusalem to us in this time and this place? “Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.” “Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them.” What is Jerusalem to us in this time and place thousands of miles away and thousands of years away from the time when Jesus lamented this city of his dedication as an infant in the Temple and this city of his death on a Roman cross? “Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” says Jesus, “...the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34) Why does Advent bring us again and again the songs and visions of Jerusalem? Well, maybe it is because so many love it as... home.

Two stories of home:

My grandparents' house was the first I ever knew with stairs rising to a whole other world above my head. The stairs were enclosed, like a secret passage to a hidden playground that, when climbed, opened into a new place where my brothers and I played apart from the watchful eyes of our elders, bouncing on beds, hiding and seeking in rooms and closets of our own, hunting imaginary enemies, looking out at the world from the windows up above the ordinary level of the streets and sidewalks below. We loved it! It was our place. It was in that house that I learned to listen to the sounds of the night in the tree tops near the level of the windows. It was in that house that I learned to slide down the stairs and my behind like it was some sort of carnival ride. It was in that house that my grandparents arose in the dark and rustled about in the world below the stairs, and if I came down in the darkness, I would be welcomed into the warm and bright kitchen to sit with my grandmother as she drank coffee poured from her cup into her saucer to cool before it touched her lips. I remember these things as if it was yesterday. It was magical for a kid.

But those days were many years ago now. Times are so changed. And when I recently called up Google maps on my computer to see what had become of the old central Florida neighborhood of my grandparents, it was gone. Literally. Absorbed by the citrus packing house that once bordered, but now consumed, the little town. I was stunned. My grandparents' home, a home of my childhood, was not even there anymore. Plowed under a parking lot, along with every other house on the row.

Another story...

I shared my first office with a man named Haddad. Bob Haddad. We were friends who had worked our way from university classes to university jobs together. And we shared space and resources and watched one another's efforts and heard one another's phone calls. I remember one day hearing Bob's voice drop to a sort of lament, a series of somber questions, concern on his face. And I tried not to eavesdrop too much, but I knew something was wrong. And after a few minutes Bob hung up the telephone, and his face was ashen. He was clearly stunned. And he looking at me, and he said: "Well, that's done. My grandfather's home in Palestine was just crushed by the bulldozers for a new settlement. It's gone. Forever."

“Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them. For they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies; but God will bring them back to you, carried in glory as on a royal throne.”

Homecoming. Jerusalem is... like home. Yet it has been home to humankind perhaps for some 6,000 years. We know it as the “City of David” the great king of ancient Israel, who some 3,000 years ago took the city and transformed it into a great capital, and David's son, Solomon, erected the wondrous Temple there. Jerusalem was already home to some, then it became home to others, loved and cherished. And hundreds of years later, David's people were torn from the city of their ancestors and driven to exile in the lands of Assyria and Babylon. They were taken from home, and

forced into alien lands. And generations later, descendants of this displaced people returned to Jerusalem to rebuild their home. It is this tragedy of oppression and renewal of hope that empowers the writer of Baruch to sing a song of gladness: “Arise, O Jerusalem!” Look for your people to return once again... home. Jerusalem is the symbol of home, of peace – of salvation.

But the land was not entirely empty at their homecoming, and the city of Jerusalem was not free of all habitation. Jerusalem was already home to some, and it became home again to others. Over and over and over again. So, it was in Jesus’ time, when a conquered and beaten people looked for a savior to free them from the Roman Empire. And so it is to this day. Jerusalem, a home for many peoples and a home for the spiritual dreams of millions. The people there... They are generations of Jews, Muslims, Christians, and others, grandparents and parents and children who live and die in a small but significant land. It is home for all of them. But home like home really is: beloved, conflicted, blessed, troubled, sometimes magical, sometimes broken. Ups and downs like the jagged edges of the hills and deep ravines of the valleys. Home brings comfort and difficulty.

This is why in the season of Advent we hear the voices cry out: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the

rough ways made smooth...” In Jerusalem, this beloved yet troubled city, is the symbol of hope and peace for which so many long, yet do not see. We look for it! We yearn for peace? We proclaim the time of Jerusalem’s healing, its straightening, and its earnest welcoming of peace and salvation for all humankind. In Advent we look for this, we pray for this, as if Jerusalem were indeed, in some faithful way, our home too.

But our work is not done. Jerusalem is not at peace, nor has thousands of years of war and conflict brought peace into being. The voice of one crying in the wilderness is still crying out. Apparently we must broaden our idea of a peaceful world and make the vision of a peaceful Jerusalem come to pass everywhere, even in our hearts. We must learn to be home together. Anne Lamott puts it this way for us in our time:

“During Advent, we have to sit in our own anxiety and funkiness long enough to know what a Promised Land would look like, or, to put it another way, what it means to be saved --- which, if we are to believe Jesus or Ghandi, specifically means to see everyone on earth as family.”¹

¹ (Anne Lamott, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005) pp. 257-260. Quoted from Synthesis for December 6, 2015.)