

The Peace of Jerusalem

How many of you have been to Jerusalem? I have, twice. The first, most formative time was in 2011, when Lois and I went there with Doug and Holly, as part of a Tabor/Bethel interterm course called “Jerusalem Seminar.” (Doug and Holly have helped lead that course multiple times.) The learning tour started in Jordan with such biblical sites as Mt. Nebo, then moved to Israel/Palestine, and after visiting such key biblical sites as Bethlehem and Jericho, Nazareth and Capernaum, we spent the last five or so days in the city of Jerusalem, one of the most ancient cities in the world.

It is a city full of irony. Its very name seems to speak tantalizingly about peace—the word salem—shalom in Hebrew—means peace. But Salem is also the name of an ancient Canaanite god. So which is it? A city of peace, or of a pagan god?

Jerusalem is an important, holy city for three of the world’s religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Giving it the potential to be a beautiful beacon for peace. And yet few cities have experienced as much violence and discord—and for as many centuries—as Jerusalem.

On the surface, the conflict today appears to center around the perennial question, to whom does Jerusalem belong? To modern-day Jews, who believe they inherited it from the land’s first settlers, who in turn believe they were given it by God? Or does it belong to the modern-day Palestinians, who believe they descended from that land’s original Arab inhabitants?

The begged-for question is, can’t it belong to both? Can’t it be a holy city that transcends racial, sectarian boundaries, that points to and at least partially actualizes the human potential for peace? Or does Jerusalem merely symbolize our human tendency toward discord, conflict, and deadly competition?

One of the city’s ironies is that way back in the eighth century BCE, which was the time of the prophet Isaiah, Jerusalem was already known for this tendency toward conflict. As one of my commentators wrote, “In the book of Isaiah, the city of Jerusalem is a vexing and unending problem. The city... is the locus of national pride, self-sufficiency, and self-serving religion. That arrogant enterprise is massively critiqued and condemned by the prophet.” [2] Wow. And if we jump forward to the first century CE and turn to the Gospel of Luke, we read that “as Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept for it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.’” And many, many people continue to weep for it today. Including me.

As we heard during the “Advent with the Children” time this morning, early in his career the prophet Isaiah had a beautiful, God-given, “wide awake” dream about the city of Jerusalem. Listen again to that dream, this time from the NRSV. *“The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come, the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and...all the nations shall stream to it. 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 that that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”*

As an aside, throughout the Bible, mountains are often places where God's people not only meet God, but learn about God's will for the world. Early in the Old Testament we have Mt. Sinai. In the New Testament we have the "Sermon on the Mount." And in the prophet Isaiah we have Mt. Zion, the site of the temple in Jerusalem.

Now listen to this. *"He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."* That is certainly one of the most hopeful, powerful verses in the entire Bible!

Some of you went to hear Shane Claiborne speak at Hesston Mennonite this past year as part of his "Beating Guns" speaking tour. During which, first as Shane spoke, and then later as Doug Miller's son Adam told his story about being shot in the Excel plant several years ago, Shane's friend and colleague Michael Martin, who actually is a Mennonite from Colorado literally melted and beat a gun into a small tool that looked like a garden hoe. One down, 857 million to go. (According to Wikipedia, that's the number of guns there are in civilian hands. Not counting military or law enforcement, which take the number of guns worldwide above one billion. What would Isaiah say today?)

A couple of centuries after Isaiah, the writer of Psalm 122 seemed to be referring to the prophet's hopeful words in Isaiah 2:1-5. *"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'"* The psalmist goes on in verse 3 to describe Jerusalem as a city *"bound firmly together,"* in other words, a city at peace. And listen to verse 5: *"For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David."* Which appears to corroborate Isaiah's "wide awake" dream of Jerusalem as a place where justice is practiced, implying clearly that peace and justice must go hand in hand.

To which I would say a loud and convicted "amen." And which leads me to my own "wide awake" dream of what peace with justice might look like in Jerusalem today. No more illegal settlements being built in the Occupied Territories by the Israeli government. No more Palestinian homes being demolished. Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, both Christian and Muslim, sitting down together and agreeing to share this most holy of cities. That would truly inspire the rest of the world's nations to stream to it, including our own nation, to see what we too could learn about peace.

But starting in verse 6, the psalmist takes a very disturbing turn. *"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May they prosper who love you."* Which begs the question: whose God is being specified and loved here? Israel's God? Is it truly only the original twelve tribes of Israel to whom this prosperous peace belongs, which the psalmist seems to suggest in verse 4? His so called prayer for peace continues in verse seven: *"Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers."*

During the Jerusalem Seminar we saw for ourselves the so-called "security wall" in various locations, which the government of Israel says is purely for self protection, but which in reality encroaches on Palestinian land and has separated Palestinian farmers from their olive groves. And along the wall we saw security towers, housed by well-armed IDF soldiers, who have been known to shoot Palestinian youth who sometimes protest the injustices by throwing stones or occasionally burning tires.

The psalmist's prayer for Jerusalem continues in verse 8: *"For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, 'Peace be within you.'"* Leaving us to wonder, for whom exactly is this prayer for peace? Is it only for one's own relatives and friends? What happened to the prophet

Isaiah's dream of "all the nations" streaming to Jerusalem, thereby learning war no more? Is peace for everyone, or only a favored few? To be sure, the modern nation of Israel is entitled to live in peace and security, but not at the expense of those beyond its expanding borders. A distinction to which our own nations' leaders and their three billion dollars of annual military support seem largely blind.

On this First Sunday of Advent, we are all invited into Isaiah's wide-awake dream of peace, starting perhaps in Israel-Palestine but then spreading to all the corners of the earth. We are invited to echo the psalmist's prayer for peace in Jerusalem, but only to the extent that that prayer is ultimately for everyone, and not just one nation and one people. And even as we sing once again about the coming of Immanuel, God with us into our world, we are invited to weep with Christ Jesus as he surely continues to weep for Jerusalem.

Amen.

Questions for pondering or discussion:

What is a part of the world for which you have a wide-awake dream about peace?

What are some of the beacons for peace in the world today?

What could you do to be a beacon for peace?

What are some of the differences between Isaiah 2:1-5 and Psalm 122?

What might a prayer for peace sound like today?

To whom does the United States belong?

What would have to happen for all of the world's guns to be "beaten into garden tools?"