

St. Francis Episcopal Church, Holden, MA
The First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2007
© The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem...peace be within your walls and quietness within your towers.

(Psalm 122:6a; 7)

In the spring of 1984 I flew from London to Tel Aviv; from there I took a bus to Jerusalem. I was spending my junior year of college in Scotland, which is hardly known for its balmy weather, and a friend who was at Oxford called me up in January and suggested we travel to Israel for spring break to take in some sunshine.

We did get that, and much more. It was a spiritual pilgrimage of sorts. One of the coolest things for me was taking a bus north and eating a fish dinner by the Sea of Galilee. One of the most jarring things was sitting on a bus next to soldiers with M-16 rifles. You couldn't go anywhere without seeing them. I also remember going into a nightclub where you got searched as you entered, to make sure you didn't have a bomb strapped to your body. And then you entered and they locked the door behind you and it was almost like being in Boston or New York: loud music, lots of drinking, and a necessary dose of denial about the violence of a world that could not in truth be locked out.

So whenever I read this psalm that we prayed today, which asks us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, I do. Christian pilgrims pray on the site of Christ's crucifixion at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, while Muslims pray at the Dome of the Rock and Jews at the western wall of the second temple—the "Wailing Wall." It truly is a microcosm of the world, and a breeding ground for so much of the fear and terror that divides the children of Abraham. Presumably there are people at any given moment offering prayers for peace at each site; and yet we keep killing each other in the name of God. There are some in each of these three great traditions who presumably cannot imagine peace in Jerusalem until one or both of the other sons of Abraham leave. But I cannot believe that is the peace that God has in mind. That's just the strong defeating the weak. In some real sense the fate of the world, at least in the western hemisphere, is tied to the peace of Jerusalem and that means both peace and justice for Jew and Christian and Muslim alike.

For the scribes who first remembered and treasured these ancient texts, peace on earth begins in the city whose name ironically means peace. That is the prophet Isaiah's vision as well: that Torah will go out from Jerusalem and that as God's Word spreads, peace will become contagious enough that every nation will yearn to beat "swords into plowshares"—that is, to convert the implements of war into implements of peace. A few years back I remember when Church World Services sponsored a program where defused landmines in Cambodia were melted down and recast as bells for their animals; many people in this congregation purchased those bells as symbols of hope and as signs of solidarity. This image is about reaping a true and lasting peace dividend. So consider this as we enter into this season of Advent: what would it take for us to get to the point where we are spending the money that it costs to fund the war in Iraq on the Millennial Development Goals?

In the meantime it is hard to imagine that there will be peace in Jerusalem and quietness within her towers in my lifetime. But I wonder what it would take for my children or grandchildren to see this prayer answered, and then I ask: what can be done *now* to begin to move in that direction of shalom? We can vote and influence in some small measure our nation's foreign policy. One place to begin might be to ask harder questions of all those running for president, questions that deal with these big issues rather than the silliness we've seen so far. I'm not naïve about that, and realize that individually most of us have very little impact on world peace. But who knows: maybe one of our young people will one day occupy an office in Foggy Bottom as Secretary of State and broker a lasting peace in the Middle East. Maybe these words from Psalm 122 will take hold and someone will say, "here am I, send me."

But this sermon isn't just for that one person, because in the meantime, there is work to be done and no Secretary of State can make it happen if there isn't a will and passion among ordinary people. Advent waiting isn't passive. It is about expectancy and hope and there is work for all of us to do in these next four weeks and beyond. It seems to me that the invitation to pray for the peace of Jerusalem is really an invitation from the poets and the prophets of ancient Israel to let peace on earth begin with us. Isaiah was from Jerusalem, after all. And the psalms attributed to King David were sung in the temple in Jerusalem. Peace on earth has to begin somewhere, and I think the first place is in our own heart's desire. From there it can spread to our tables and congregations and neighborhoods and by the grace of God, even to our town meetings. Maybe all of that is enough work to keep us all busy for a while! In polarized times, the work God has given us to do is to show the world what it means to live together in love.

I know; that seems so insignificant. Maybe it even sounds a little trite. It's a big world out there and the problems seem so insurmountable. But the longest journey still begins with the first step, and as far as I can tell there is really no other way to move from "here" to "there" without starting to move. Moreover, one of the great gifts of a diocese and national church and global communion is that we are connected to each other (if only we can organize ourselves for mission rather than institutional preservation.) From beginning to end, the God of the Bible doesn't answer prayers by doing magic tricks; God answers prayers by raising up ordinary people to respond by saying, "here am I...send me."

The beginning of Advent is a chance to begin anew and to recommit ourselves to God's dream of shalom not only in Jerusalem but in Worcester County. Ultimately all of these apocalyptic texts we get at the end of Advent and in the beginning of a new church season are about letting go of the old hatreds and fears so that the new Jerusalem and the new Worcester County can emerge. Shalom isn't just a cease-fire; it's about abundant life for all of God's children. The season of Advent is first and foremost about preparing ourselves for the coming of the Prince of Peace by letting Christ be born in us, and accepting God's call to be instruments of peace and ambassadors of reconciliation.

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. That can sound like an invitation to do yet one more thing, for which probably none of us have the energy. Add it to your lists—work for world peace! It can sound like an invitation to be messiahs and save the world. But that is not what Advent is for and not what this sermon is calling us to. We already have a messiah! Our work is not to save the world; that has already happened. The invitation is to share in that ongoing work as a response to the love of God made known in Jesus. And so I think it appropriately begins with prayers for healing, especially since so much violence stems from our own brokenness. When we feel tired and alone and afraid or hurt, it is so easy to lash out at others. Today we pray for our own health in

body, mind, and spirit—and for peace in our hearts at a time when the stresses of making our lists and checking them twice threaten to undo us.

We are Episcopalians; so I don't anticipate any walkers or crutches being discarded at the altar today. But who knows! It is, however, a statement of faith: that God is here and that God does care. It is an acknowledgement that all of us are in need of healing and it is not selfish to pray for ourselves; it's like putting on our own oxygen masks when the cabin pressure drops in our plane, before we try to help others. But as we offer prayers for healing this day we do also pray for others. This is World AIDS day, and I read this week that incidents of HIV are on the rise again among young people. Some of our friends will have tests done this week or treatments for diagnoses that scare them and us out of our wits. We pray for peace in our homes at a time of year when we know that calls to the police department for domestic disputes will go up. This season when we yearn for all to be calm and bright is also a time when fear or depression can become all consuming. Pray for the people in your neighborhood and for the place where you work or go to school who suffer from depression or grief. Pray for this commonwealth, and for this nation, and for all the nations. Pray for peace on earth and then for the courage to pray the next words: let it begin with me.