

“Travelling Together” Psalm 122

We all know the anxious feeling of an impending journey: The physical strain of completing projects before the trip and the mental stress of packing and re-packing and then re-packing some more. And I haven't even mentioned the journey itself. The wondering: Will I arrive safely? Will I be on time? Will it be as I expected? And for those ADD kids or husbands, how many times can those words, “How much further,” be spoken? If you know of such journeys you can relate, more than you realize to the ancient Hebrews. Three times a year the routine of good Jews everywhere would be packing up and traveling – some times a few miles – most of the time many mile from wherever they called home to Jerusalem. Three times a year they would make sure someone could look after their animals or care for their crops before departing. Three times a year they would organize things for the journey and yes hear their children say on the journey, “How much further?”

But unlike their time, our twenty first century generation passes time on the journey staring at small electronic devices or listening to speakers from around the world on their ipods on topics from crime to Christ. No, our ancient ancestors were unlike us moderns - not un-evolved as some would have you believe, but different. You see the ancient culture of the Hebrews was oral in nature, story tellers they were, and instructed by their God and ours to “Fix (God’s Word on their) hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on (their) hands and bind them on (their) foreheads. “Teach them (that is God’s Word) to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and *when you walk along the road*, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land the LORD swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth. If you carefully observe all these commands I am giving you to follow—to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him and to hold fast to him— (Deut 11:18-22) Did you hear all those instruction about remembering and re-telling the story at all times, in all circumstances even “when you walk along the road”? By these words alone then I don't expect the one, two or three or more day journey to Jerusalem was travelled in silence but as they journeyed I imagine there was much talk and even more psongs.

I believe the latter – in the psinging of psongs - because of what tradition tells us about the grouping of Psalm 120 to Psalm 134. Please know none of the Psalms in our Bible were originally numbered in the ancient manuscripts. Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd...” and so on.” So there was certainly no editor making sure Psalm 22 went before Psalm 23 before the book was bound because of the number at the top of the page. But we do know, as historians and theologians far more knowledgeable than you and I tell us, these Psalms – Psalms 120 to 134 were meant to be

together but even more meant to be sung, but not just sung anytime but sung at very specific occasions – before and during the journey. Psalm 120 to Psalm 134 are called “Songs of Ascent” or to use Eugene Peterson’s “earthy” words, “Pilgrimage Psalms.” In fact this is how each is titled, not by later editors but by the original authors themselves. Although not familiar language to us an “Ascent Song” is an apparent reference to *ascending* or taking a *pilgrimage* to Jerusalem to the annual festivals held there. Reading again from the book of Deuteronomy, “Three times a year all shall appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose: at the festival of the unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, at the festival of booths,” (Deut 16:16) And since Jerusalem is high in the mountains the expression “go up” is fitting and because people travelled great distances the word pilgrimage is just as fitting. These Psalms were therefore so important, so cherished by our ancestors, that they once existed as a separate collection, a kind of mini hymnbook for the use of those making the pilgrimage to the Holy City. Psalm 122 then is a reflection, words spoken and songs sung by those about to make the trip.

You and I are not all that familiar with pilgrimages or the kind of journeys Muslims must make to Mecca, for example, at least once in their life or the sojourn displaced Maritimers venture upon every summer. For the Hebrews pilgrimages were an ancient practice that continued even to the time of Christ. Every year, for example, Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover, scripture tells us. When Jesus was twelve years old, we are told that Jesus’ family “went up for the feast, according to the custom of the feast. When they had fulfilled the days [of the feast], his parents started home, unaware that the boy Jesus had stayed behind in Jerusalem,” writes the gospel writer Luke (Luke 2:41-43). Putting aside the main point of that story (The first affirmation of Jesus’ calling) these verses assume traveling to Jerusalem was not like you and I showing up to the office party only so the boss could see us and then we leave. Rather, Luke 2:43 states that Jesus’ parents returned home when they had “fulfilled the days” – plural. This of course implies that Jesus’ family did not just spend an hour or two or just the day in Jerusalem for Passover but rather a number of days, and maybe even all seven days that was required by law. As one historian tells us, “A family of pilgrims stayed in Jerusalem for the entire seven days of the Feast of Passover, and the entire eight days of the Feast of Tabernacles.” But don’t worry about the journey because they sang to pass the time. For the trip was but a layover before another journey began.

Life is a journey, a sojourn, even though we might prefer other image like a “box of chocolates.” Life is a journey. As James Limburg reminds us, “Life is not a circle with possession at the outer boundaries, then friends, then family and in the center (us). No the Bible views our life as a journey and the melody running through it is a more bracing tune, closer to the Spirit or at least closer to the sound track of the Littlest Hobo. Most of us prefer the term “wandering.” But wandering is what

the Israelites did for forty years. The sojourn of the Hebrew slaves was no journey for a journey has a destination in mind. This is why the Psalmist refers to our particular song as “ascending.” Life is a journey but even more, for the Christian, life is an ascent or pilgrimage to something bigger. To the Hebrews, of course it was Jerusalem, the Holy City of God, the place set apart, the location of Solomon’s Temple, the spot where the people of God worshipped. There seems to be, according to the Psalmist, only one emotion when Jerusalem came up in conversation. Whether in the field or around the water cooler, whether at the kitchen table or on the street the emotion, I dare say, was always the same for the Psalmist begins, “When they said, “Let’s go...” my heart leaped for joy.” (Psalm 122:1)

Can you picture it? Can you see parents telling their children, “We are going to Jerusalem and they leaped with joy” or husbands telling their wives, “It’s time to go to Jerusalem” and the wives leaped for joy? As another author has written, “Psalm 122 contemplates a pilgrimage of believers to [Jerusalem]. It is a journey we are invited to imagine, to the city of real holiness, new regime, fresh king. The substance of the new order is ‘peace and prosperity,’ ‘peace and security,’ ‘peace,’ and ‘good.’ In Isaiah 2:1-5, the vision is enlarged. Now it is a pilgrimage of all nations to the city. The journey is to embrace Torah (verse 3), to practice justice and equity. And the result will be an ordered society marked by disarmament and well-being (verse 4) – no more war, no more policies of greed, exploitation, and rapaciousness. The verses from Psalm 122 follow the same pattern as the [Isaiah] oracle: diverse groups go up to a high place to worship, God’s divine judgment follows, and then there is peace” (and joy). (Source: Rev. Jeffrey Spencer) Quite a different melody from last week, don’t you think? 100 Psalms earlier Allyson reminded us of the opening words of her Psalm: “God, God . . . my God! Why did you dump me miles from nowhere?” (Psalm 22:1) No, the first verse of our song is quite different and one which I didn’t quite quote correctly. It really read, “When they said let’s go **to the house of Yahweh** my heart leaped for joy.” (122:1)

Is that how you felt this morning as your feet hit the floor? “A mother woke her son up on Sunday morning and told him he needed to get ready to go to church. The son replied to his mother that he didn’t want to go to church this morning. She told him nonsense he should get up and go to church. “But mom” he replied, “Everybody hates me, the sermons are boring and none of my friends ever come.” His mother replied, “Now, son...! First, everybody doesn’t hate you, only a couple of bullies and you just have to stand up to them. Second, the sermons mean a lot to many people. If you listened to them, you’d be surprised at how good they are in helping people. Third, you have lots of friends at church. They are always having you over to their house. And finally, you have to go, you’re the pastor!!” (Source: Internet)

Could there be a place that inspires such joy? “Of course,” someone says, “have you never heard of Disney?” But the pilgrimage of Psalm 122 is different. For the Hebrews it has the tones of pre-exilic days of a song magnifying a city bound together but even more a people firmly bound together. Tim Keller would write, “What Jerusalem was to the ancient Jews the church is to believers in Christ.” The images that may not be necessarily be obvious, but I believe needs to be, from our Psalm this morning is the sheer size of the gathering of God’s people in Jerusalem, but even more the sheer size of the pilgrimage. I imagine it would have nothing on even the traffic leaving Florida from Irma. Here was a stream of followers, leaving behind everything. Sound familiar?

Here, we have traveled to KesPres from places near and far. Homes as close as a block away and homes more than half an hour away. But for what reason have we come? Are we simply a group of people who have been duped into seeing “faith as a crutch” as some would say? Is it because we have inherited something from our parents and our grandparents so we simply because this is what have been “trained” to do – like monkeys in a cage. Are we here because it is a good thing to add on our LinkedIn account because “church goer” is an honourable and respectable activity. Or is there something more. Have we come begrudgingly and unexpectant or expectant and joyful. And why are even here together. The world tells you, we don’t need one another. And even others who claim Christ say the same thing.

Like the Hebrews we come because we are followers of Christ. We come here, because this is the place the “church” worships, just like our ancient ancestors. But like them we do not stay – but rather we go from here and then we return and then we go from here. James Limburg says, “The call of Jesus was not “gather around me” “but follow me.” (Source: Limburg) So follow we must – from this Temple to outside and back into our neighbourhoods and beyond and then back again. For yes, we travel, but we travel, not alone but together and all the while we psing His psongs. Thanks be to God. Amen.