

Lent 4

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2 Chronicles 36:14–23, Psalm 122, Ephesians 2:4-10, John 6:1-15

Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem!

Our Psalm for today exhorts the listener to pray for the city's peace: to pray that Jerusalem, the city of peace, will actually be a city of peace. Jerusalem is an actual city but it is also a longing. Daniel prays toward Jerusalem three times a day even though the city was destroyed and the Temple burned to the ground. He is longing for the restoration of the city of peace.

This image of peace, of Shalom, contains a longing that stretches back to the early moments of creation and forward the culmination of the ages in the New Jerusalem, the New City of Peace that comes down from above. The word shalom speaks a peace that is bigger than just not fighting. It is bigger than just a little peace and quiet.

Shalom looks back to Eden. To Adam and Eve dwelling in a place of joy and communion, a place of abundance. It reminds us of the goodness of all things in creation and the generosity of God. Shalom also looks forward to the new Jerusalem. Not simple Adam and Eve but the families of the earth living together in this play of joy and communion.

Shalom has a sense of harmony and justice. This peace offers a glimpse of a world where justice really does roll down like waters, where the motherless child finds a home, where warring brothers embrace, where weapons of war have been turned into tools to garden and cultivate the land. Psalm 122 exhorts us to pray for this city, the city of Jerusalem. This is prayer for the both the physical Jerusalem where the pilgrims are headed, but it is also a prayer for the coming of the city of peace that will transform all nations.

Psalm 122 is a Psalm of Ascents. Pilgrimage songs for people traveling to festival in Jerusalem. As the people walk, they sing. They celebrate this glory city of peace where the Lord will keep you from all evil; where the eyes of the people look to the Lord; where our tears and our pain and our loss have been exchanged for feasting, laughter, and shouts of joy.

Contrast this glorious picture with our reading from Chronicles. The city of peace is in turmoil. It is not a city of peace. Those in the Temple and those beyond the Temple are unfaithful to God. They have polluted the land with their crimes. Ezekiel describes a city more wicked than the surrounding nations and even more wicked than Sodom and Gomorrah. This is a city of sexual exploitation, of oppressing the weak, of corruption at every level, and even of child sacrifice. The city of peace is a city of war, a city of bloodshed, a city of death.

Jerusalem is going to be destroyed. Burned to the ground. Some people will die of pestilence. Some will die of famine. Some will die by the sword. And the rest will be scattered into Babylon and surrounding nations.

Can the long awaited city of peace even be built in a world of war, a world of sin and death?

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus feeds the multitudes and they want to make Him king. His is king already, but they do not understand the nature of his kingdom. The bread is but an image of

His very life to be poured out for them. Just as Peter rebuked Jesus when he explained that the Messiah must die, they want to build the city of peace without the cross on the basis of Jesus' miraculous provision of bread.

At times, we may desire Him to build the kingdom in the same way. "Lord, can't you just send down fire and demonstrate your glory." We want a dramatic miracle that will bring the multitudes to Christ, that will change the heart our nation and turn the people toward the Lord, but the Kingdom of heaven, the City of Peace cannot be built without the cross. Outside of the cross, it will simply devolve into the brokenness of a world trapped in sin and death.

Jesus has come to establish a true and lasting city. He has come to establish Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the Living God. He has come to establish the long-awaited city of peace. The Shalom that will blanket the nations. But this will not happen outside of the cross.

Staniloae writes, "Only by the cross can we remain in submission to God and in true love towards our neighbors. We cannot purify or develop our own spiritual life, nor that of others, nor that of the world in general, by seeking to avoid the cross. Consequently, we do not discover either the depth or the greatness of the potential forces and powers of this world as a gift of God if we try to live without the cross. The way of the cross is the only way which leads upwards, the only way which carries creation towards the true heights for which it was made."

As we read the Gospels, we feel the pull of the stories toward the cross. The whole ministry of Jesus Christ is leaning toward the cross. Even as a baby in the Temple, Simeon sees a glimpse and warns Mary, "a sword will pierce though your own soul." During Lent we've been moving toward the cross and toward our Baptism. Both baptism and the Eucharist are literally soaked in the reality of the cross. We are following Jesus to the cross.

The cross will bring us face to face with our own absolute helpless estate. It brings us face to face with death. We are helpless to evade death. How do we even begin to reflect upon the cross? In one sense, it is bigger than our imagination can grasp. We might simply wait in silence before the cross. We might participate in the Stations of the Cross. We might watch films about the crucifixion. We might practice a habit of visualization as described by St. Ignatius. We might also consider some of the Biblical passages.

Isaiah offers images of the suffering servant: he was despised; rejected by men; a man of sorrows; acquainted with grief; he bears our griefs and our sorrows; he is smitten and afflicted; he is pierced, crushed for our iniquities; he is beaten and his wounds bring peace and healing; he bears the iniquity of us all. He is oppressed, judged, cut off from the land of the living; taken away.

We might read the cross in light of the book of Job. A righteous man bears unspeakable judgment. His life is destroyed. His family is killed. His body is broken. His mind is tormented. God is absent. In his darkest hour, Job friends turn against him. He believes God has turned against and he cries out against his own birth. Job gives us a hint of the anguish of Jesus.

Jesus enters into chasm of death that separates God and man. He enters into the divisions and brokenness of all human families. He enters into the anguish of all the Jobs of the world. He does so willingly. Jesus pours out all of his life for all of the life of the world.

He alone can enter into the division and corruption of all things. For all things have been created in and through Him. He descends into the depths of anguish and even below all human pain and suffering.

Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord. This is the voice of a man sinking into death with nothing to hold onto. He is slipping down, down, down into darkness, emptiness, nothingness. Jesus descends below our lowest, deepest terror of separation from life and from God. He descends into the final nothingness of sin.

We cannot fully grasp riches of the cross without simultaneously reflecting upon the resurrection. Our second reading restores us to the city of peace. Paul writes,

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved — ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph 2:4–7)

Even as Jesus is raised from the place of the dead, we are raised. Paul is writing to Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus when he says, “even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” In His resurrection, Jesus has not only restored His people, He is lifted up the Gentiles: those outside the community of God. Now the people of God are made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

Paul extends this image in other letters to show how the cross bridges the divisions between rich and poor; male and female, and all the various ethnic divisions. We were dead in our trespasses. Like the people of Babel, we were separated and wandering under the curse of different languages and cultures. Like the exiles of Israel, we have known the longing for restoration. In Christ’s death, we have died. In his resurrection, we are raised. We are made alive together.

At the end of the book of Job, he and his friends come to realize that God’s blessings are not a result of human faithfulness but of God’s generosity. Job has come to the very edge of life and death and has been restored. All of life becomes gift again.

The cross of Christ restores us as individuals and as a community. All of life is gift. Paul continues in Ephesians proclaiming that the Father will shower us with His immeasurable riches of grace in Christ Jesus now and in the ages to come. Even now, through cross of Christ, we get a glimpse, a taste of the New Jerusalem come down. Even now we begin to taste the fruit that is healing for the nations. And even now we follow Christ in the way of the cross. Resting in His absolute faithful love, we can pour out our very lives for a world in need.