

Advent 2B - December 7, 2008
St. David's

“Jerusalem, my happy home, when shall I come to thee? When shall my sorrows have an end? The joys when shall I see?” We sing its praises in our songs and hymns. We have revered its sacred nature since the time of King David. Three major religions consider it the most holy place on earth. Muslims revere the city as the “furthest shrine” from which the prophet Mohammed ascended to heaven. The spot of that ascension is the holiest Muslim site, the Dome of the Rock. Christians recognize Jerusalem as the birthplace of our tradition and the place of the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Christ. Constantine’s mother, Helena is credited with discovering many of the sacred sites of Jerusalem and starting the practice of making pilgrimages to Jerusalem to view those sites. And of course, Jerusalem has, since the time of David, been the center of faith for Judaism. Every year at the conclusion of the Jewish Seder, we repeat the famous cry that Jews have said for millennia, “Next year, next year in Jerusalem!”

As the apex of sacredness for Judaism, Islam and Christianity, Jerusalem has faced a constant tug-of-war for 3000 years. When today’s first reading from Isaiah was written, the Jewish people had been kicked out of their beloved Jerusalem and had been living in exile in Babylon for over a generation. King Nebuchednezzar of the Babylonian empire had the city burned to the ground in 586 BCE and the temple was totally destroyed. By the time today’s Gospel was written almost 700 years later, the temple had been rebuilt, and the new one had just been destroyed again. In between those two temple destructions, Jerusalem was occupied by the Persians and then attacked and taken over by Alexander the Great. After that, the Egyptians attacked and captured the

city, then the Syrians and finally the Romans. After the second destruction of the temple in 70 AD, when the Gospel of Mark was written, the city was taken over by another Persian conquest, then after that by the Byzantines. In 1096, the Crusades begin and the city was captured by Pope Urban and the Christians. Next, the Kurds assaulted and took it back over from the Crusaders. Richard the Lion Heart also attacked it. A Sultan attack followed that. Then the Turks came in and seized it. After that, the Mameluks of Egypt assaulted and captured it. To break up the monotony, in 1348 the town was finally decimated by something other than an alien force. The Black Plague wiped them out.

In the 20th century, we had the British conquest of Jerusalem, followed by the Israel War for Liberation in 1948. As we are all painfully aware, nothing much has changed to this very hour, as attacks continue in the city every day as three religions and numerous other political occupiers vie for control of a place that so many see as the holiness center of the universe. In fact, the wars that continue to this moment in the rest of the Middle East, in Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan, all seem rooted in this same necessity to fight for and protect religious geography. Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Hezbollah leaders have all stated that the battle over religious land is one of the central reasons their organizations exist. And while all the facts are not yet in regarding the Mumbai attack in India, it seems likely that once again, this battle is over geography and religion. India is predominantly Hindu and Pakistan is overwhelmingly Muslim. The group that evidence is pointing to now as spurning the attack, Lashkar-e-taiba, the army of the pure, has stated in the past its desire to annex Kashmir as part of Pakistan.

Kashmir is one of the few places in India where there is a majority of Muslims.

For 3000 years, humanity has been unable to solve this quandary. Because the geography of the Middle East is so full of religiously significant sites for a number of different religious traditions, people continue to be willing to kill and maim to protect it. Because each of our sacred texts speak so respectfully and reverently about these places, it seems that people feel justified in murdering each other to defend it. Any movement of this geography from one religion, culture or ethnicity to another, has been seen as an attack against the other's faith and an attack against the other's God. All of which has created disastrous results, causing some of the worst suffering humanity has ever experienced.

It is this terribly bloody history that was on my mind as I pondered our readings for the Second Sunday of Advent. After dwelling on the suffering that has been caused by what I will term this theology of geographical sacredness, it would be difficult to argue with anyone who suggests that organized religion has caused more pain than it has prevented.

So the question I asked myself this past week is this. Does Islam, Judaism and Christianity really profess a theology of geographical sacredness? Do our traditions actually teach us that Jerusalem and the entire Middle East is the most sacred place on earth and as such, we should do everything, including killing each other, to protect it?

Certainly our sacred texts do speak glowingly of Jerusalem and I would argue do suggest a theology of the sacredness of place. But this morning's readings point us in a wholly different direction than the world has gone in the last 3000 years. For one, they

make it clear that Jerusalem is not the birthplace of Judaism or Christianity. If we had to choose a geographical location for the birthplace of our religious traditions based on today's texts, it would, in fact, not be in a city at all. Where are we told is the most sacred place in both our Hebrew and Christian traditions? Yep. The wilderness. The desert.

You might imagine that in today's first text, as Isaiah is speaking to the exiled Jews in Babylon, he would hearken back to the good ol' days when they all lived in the holy city of Jerusalem. But instead, he takes them back much further. He has them think about the time when it all began, when Yahweh made a path for their ancestors...in the wilderness. He speaks of course, of their escape from Egypt, and the very birth of Judaism in the desert with Moses. Now, Isaiah says, God is calling them back to their origins, calling them back to enter the emptiness of the desert again, calling them back to rediscover their God, in the place where they found God the first time. Certainly their former home in Jerusalem may be at the end of that road, but the discovery of God for them did not happen after they arrived there, it occurred on the journey. Isaiah reminds his people that God is found out there, in the loneliness and beauty of the desert experience.

It is these same words from Isaiah that Mark will quote to begin his Gospel, reminding us that like Judaism, Christianity is also born not in Jerusalem or Bethlehem or any other city, but out here. If ever there was a person that should have been tied to the city of Jerusalem, it was John the Baptist. His father Zechariah is, after all, a member of the priestly class of Judaism. Zechariah believed and taught that the way to

repentance, the way to turn away from your previous path and turn toward God, was only possible through Jerusalem, through the temple sacrifice system and through the priest. He, like his relatives who came before him, saw Jerusalem and the temple as the only way to repentance. But John, the wild eyed, long haired, hippie freak, would have none of it. He abandoned his father's religious roots, he abandoned his father's theology, he abandoned Jerusalem, and headed off to the wilderness. It was there that he would preach a new way to access God and be forgiven for previous sins. That absolution, he said, did not occur through Jerusalem, not through the temple system of the Priests like his father, but through an experience of God in the desert that led to baptism. In reality, while John sounds radical to the aristocracy of Judaism, what he is professing is a recapturing of early Jewish theology, rooted in the desert, just like Isaiah.

John's cousin, the one John announces today as coming soon, will believe the same thing. Like his predecessor, Jesus also begins his ministry by wandering off into the desert for 40 days. It is there that Jesus has his own experience of the divine and where he determines how he is to live into his call to bring God to others. When he comes out, he goes to John, back in the wilderness again, to get baptized. Throughout his ministry, Jesus connects with the people, not in Jerusalem, but out in this same desert. Also like his cousin, he too preaches a Gospel of forgiveness, not through the temple system, but through a personal encounter with God experienced through the contemplative experience of the desert. Throughout his ministry, whenever Jesus needs to reorganize his vision and hear God's call, he returns to the desert.

I would argue then, that both Judaism and Christianity were born in and grew out

of the desert experience. To suggest that Jerusalem is at the heart of our religion and is worth killing others over, is to skip over the fact that John the Baptist and Jesus both openly rejected Jerusalem and the temple system as a necessary step in our journey to God. And from a Hebrew perspective, I do not know of a single Jewish scholar who does not agree that Judaism was born and is centered in the wilderness experience of the Exodus. Our faith was not, and I would argue cannot be, centered in a theology of a *specific* place. Rather, it began, is rooted in, and flourishes in a theology of a *general* place, namely the idea of desert and wilderness.

This has profound implications for what has transpired in the Middle East up until this very day. I would argue that this constant struggle and fight over sacred places has all been misguided, every bit of it. It is bad theology and a misinterpretation of our sacred text. Today's readings suggest a road out of this mess. And that road goes through the desert.

In addition to offering us a methodology and hope for ending the insanity of never ending terrorist attacks and wars in the Middle East, I believe this realization that our religious traditions are born in the experience of the desert has much to offer us in our personal lives too.

First of all, let us look at the literal interpretation of today's texts for all of us here in Page America. We need to let go of the notion, fed to us by outsiders, that people other than us have some sort of inside track to God. There remains this snobbish understanding in America that the Eastern portion of our country is erudite and educated, leading to a more direct connection to God, while the West contains a bunch

of country hicks, whose theology still resides in the 19th century. There is also the basic belief that urban areas offer us a more expansive understanding of the world and God, while small towns and rural areas create closed minded bigots.

But the fact that you and I can walk outside and immediately place ourselves in the birthplace of our religion, gives us a huge advantage over others. I realize that every time I go back East or spend a long time in an urban area. For example, Jean and I loved the academic and theological vastness of Berkeley, California. But our inability to breathe in the open space of this red rock desert ate at our souls and diminished us. It, in fact, made it difficult to literally breathe sometimes. What a great gift we have to live in a place very much like the land traveled by John and Jesus, the land where our sacred text tells us that our religion was truly born.

The *metaphorical* interpretation of today's texts are just as important. In this season of Advent, the symbol of the critical role wilderness should play in our lives reminds us of the need all of us have for quiet time and reflection. Like the people in our first reading, we too need to escape Babylon and venture into the desert. We need time away, so we too may see that we are products of our society. We too have been assimilated into the culture, forgetting that our first priority is to journey with and to God.

The day after Thanksgiving, we were all reminded of how much we get caught up in the passions of the world. Did you all see the story of the Wal-Mart employee on Long Island in New York who was actually trampled to death by crazed shoppers? People ran each other over, rushing through the door to get to a Christmas bargain. A similar event happened in Palm Desert, California. At a Toys R' Us store, two women

started arguing with one another. As passions escalated, the two men with them pulled out guns and shot each other to death. We are literally killing each other so that we can live into our afflicted, distorted consumer lifestyle.

It is from this Babylon that all of us must figure out how to escape. And the path of that escape is made obvious through today's lessons. We are in desperate need of recapturing the desert experience of Advent, not only for ourselves, but for our society.

As all of us here know very well, choosing this path in our life is not always easy. Walking across the desert requires preparation, dedication and stamina. It means being counter-cultural. It means quieting ourselves when the rest of the world is in a frenzy. It means throwing out the Santa Claus of consumption and replacing him with the Saint Nicholas we celebrate today, the one who brings abundance to those in need. It means being willing to let go of Jerusalem, so that we may find God in the reflective pool of Advent and in the wilderness of John and Jesus' desert.

The key to that journey is also the lesson we all know so well living here. We never do it alone. We enter the desert together and we travel together so that we, like our ancestors, will experience the power of God in our midst. It is never an easy journey, but as Isaiah tells us, once we do discover God together, a straight highway will open for us, where the valleys are lifted up and the mountains are made low. Let us not be afraid to abandon Jerusalem and reconnoiter right here where it all began. Next year, next year in the desert. Amen.