



“Pilgrimage Home”
Sermon by Rev. Christopher Chatelaine-Samsen
Psalm 122

SEPTEMBER 10, 2023

PSALM 122

*I was glad when they said to me,
‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’
Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.*

*Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.
To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
For there the thrones for judgement were set
up,
the thrones of the house of David.*

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
‘May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.’
For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’
For the sake of the house of the Lord our
God,
I will seek your good.*

When I lived on the East Coast, my dad and I had an annual winter trip. Every February, we’d drive up to Pinkham Notch, deep in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, for a few days of fun in the snow. Well, fun as a sort of subjective idea.

Most of our time was spent ice climbing some of the more modest cliff faces within the notches. Don’t get the wrong idea, there were no Himalaya-style heroics – our talents are somewhat more modest than that. But it was a bit intense, because it does get pretty cold up there in the mountains. Even, dare I say, Minnesota cold.

The highlight of the trip for me, though, was always the one day we chose to summit Mt. Washington, the highest peak in New England the self-proclaimed home of the worst weather on earth. To this day they claim the record for the highest windspeed ever recorded on land outside of a tornado – two-hundred and thirty one miles per hour.

A pretty good day up to the summit looks like this. You start early – 6 or 7 a.m. – at the notch down at about 2000 feet above

sea level. Single to low double digit temperatures are normal. You walk up a fire road for a mile, mile and a half until you get to a junction where the trail goes straight up the side of the mountain. That's to avoid the avalanche fields. There you take out your ice axe and put on your crampons for the rest of the ascent. In about a quarter mile, the pitch climbs to about 80%, which means you're kicking your toes in with the crampons and using the ice axe to pull yourself up. After that section, you pop out above tree line, which is when the wind starts. You still have the better part of 2000 feet of elevation to go, but now you're walking and fighting, at best, gale-force wind. On more than one occasion I've been knocked down to the ground. At this point, by the way, I've usually started humming a song to distract myself from my tired legs and the seeping cold. You're searching for cairns to find your way in the drifting snow – these are piles of rocks to mark the way – until you can finally see the rime ice-encrusted radio towers and weather station peak out on the summit. When you get to the top, there's only a short time to stay, and almost nowhere to hide from the wind, which can now be approaching hurricane force. Congratulations, you've gotten to the top. Now you still have to go all the way back down and get below tree line before dusk. Good luck.

I'm well aware that this is not everybody's idea of a good time. I've heard it called "Type Two" fun. "Type One" fun is sitting on a beach with a drink and a good novel. "Type Two" is – well, more like this. I promise I won't have us do this for an all-church retreat.

Why bother with something like this – an entirely optional ascent up to a high point, requiring time, energy, and the biggest mittens you've ever seen? And yet it's been a few years now since last having done this trip, and I miss it. I miss the bitter cold and the whiteout snow and the near vertical slog up the side of a frozen mountain. For reasons that I can't exactly explain, when I'm up there and doing that nutty thing, I feel like myself. I know myself. Although I grew up in New England, I didn't grow up near the mountains or climbing all the time, and yet it's one of those places where I feel like I'm coming back to myself, even up to a place that I can't stay. As I make pilgrimage and ascent the 6200-foot summit, axe in my hand, I feel like I'm coming home.

All pilgrimages are a sort of homecoming. It's what the psalmist is writing about in Psalm 122. If you were to open up to that psalm we just read in your own Bibles, you'd see a short notation at the top of the psalm saying, "A Song of Ascents." You'd also notice that it's not the only one. Psalms 120 through 134 are carry the same label. Just over a dozen songs that were written for one occasion. They were songs to sing during the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. Songs of "ascent" in particular because the final part of the journey was at a high point, the small mountain upon which the Temple had been first built by Solomon.

For many hundreds of years, during the ages of the great Temple in Jerusalem, all Israelites who were able would form great trains through the desert and come for the Passover annually in Jerusalem. Entire villages would travel together, and on the way they would eat together, children would

play together, and they would sing the sacred songs that had been passed down by memory, generation after generation.

This, by the way, is the explanation for that famous story about how Jesus got left behind as a twelve year old in Jerusalem. Every year Jesus would travel with his family and most of his village to Jerusalem, singing those songs, for the Passover. One year, when they left after a week or so, and the whole village left together, Mary and Joseph fairly assumed that when they didn't see their son he was hanging out with the other kids in the group. After all, parenting was truly a community activity back then. When it finally dawned on them that nobody had seen Jesus, they broke off from the group and returned to Jerusalem to see what on earth had happened to their son.

Their son, who, as it happened, had found himself to be quite at home on this pilgrimage. He'd taken up with the rabbis and been talking about some of the finer points of rabbinic interpretation. When questioned by his alarmed parents, he answers with frustrating nonchalance – "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" It seems that, on this pilgrimage up to the mountain of Jerusalem, Jesus had found himself.

How do we find ourselves? How do we get back home, wherever and whatever that is? The world can be an alienating place, even in the places that ought to feel like home. The reasons are many and intersect, but the short version is that we find ourselves in a world that's forever going faster and faster and faster, always demanding of us just a little more and just a little quicker. It's hard to find time to think, much less time to

reflect. The news is updated faster than we can read the article we're still working on. We're perpetually looking for faster ways to get places and fill that time with more podcasts, just a quick email or two, more things to fill our ears. We have fleeting seconds to talk to others, usually through a typed words and thoughtfully placed emojis. The bottom of our to-do lists grows faster than their tops shrink.

It's a world that those pilgrims of old – Jesus included – could not have imagined. A world that moves so fast with so much noise that anything that's slow, or contemplative, or weighty, or beautiful – anything that's sacred – has a hard time finding space to be noticed.

And yet those folks understood the power of pilgrimage. To leave behind the quotidian demands and to go with a song on your lips to a place that is set aside for sacredness is a way to find yourself in a world that has no shortage of voices telling you who they think you are and what you should do with yourself.

The psalmist, in this song of pilgrimage, sang with gladness about entering into the city wherein lay the temple, and he sang something that sounds very familiar to me. Pray for the peace of the city, and seek its good. Each week, we make our weekly pilgrimage to this place and do things we do nowhere else. We speak our faith in one voice. We sing songs together. We spend time in unhurried conversation. We listen in closely to find out what on earth God might be saying to us. We slow down. And then, like the psalmist, we go back out to seek the good of the city where God has sent us. We pray for the city. We serve the city. We

gather here, we sing and pray, we listen,
and we serve in this place – and in doing so,
we find ourselves again.

I hope this is a place that might help you
find yourself as you truly are – made in
God's image, made whole in Christ, and
equipped to share God's radical love with
the world. It's what we're here for. It's what
Jesus calls us to be. It's why it matters that
we gather here. It's what you can find here
that you can't find anywhere else. To make
pilgrimage and find, under the banner of
God's great love, who we are.

That's not to say that there aren't other
sacred spaces, other sacred communities to
which we make regular pilgrimage to find
ourselves at home. There are, and I hope
you have those as well, whether they're with
your neighbors or family, whether they're for
recreation or service. I hope you find God in
those places to, and through finding God,
finding yourself.

Friends, wherever and whenever you make
pilgrimage, whether it's amongst these
people gathered here in this sacred space or
anywhere else, may we all find the discipline
to be pilgrims. To set down the accelerating
demands of busy-ness. To leave the endless
list of tasks incomplete. To acknowledge that
you are unable to fulfill every expectation.
And then to allow for a broad, generous
space to pray, listen, and serve. And in that,
as you walk your pilgrim way, listen in. God
too is singing a sacred song – a love song
for the city and for the world. Sing along..