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Psalm 122:1-7, English Standard Version.

- ¹ *I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”*
- ² *Our feet have been standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem!*
- ³ *Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together,*
- ⁴ *to which the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.*
- ⁵ *There thrones for judgment were set,
the thrones of the house of David.*
- ⁶ *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
“May they be secure who love you!*
- ⁷ *Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers!”*

Luke 2:41-52, edited for brevity, English Standard Version.

⁴¹ *Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.*
⁴² *And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. ⁴³And
when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in
Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, ⁴⁴but supposing him to be in the group they
went a day’s journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives
and acquaintances, ⁴⁵and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem,
searching for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among
the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him
were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸And when his parents saw
him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated*

us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.”
⁴⁹ And he said to them, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.
⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

Acts 1:8-9, edited for readability, English Standard Version.

⁸ You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Our Jerusalem.

We’re going to do something a little different today. This should be a relaxing sermon. I’d like us to take a walk through or a fly over of Jerusalem and its history. I also have to admit that I’m going to talk about being a Christian kid, like I have in so many other sermons. I do this because my childhood is so much of what I am spiritually – a boy who was exposed to God at a young age and who was so thoroughly transformed by the experience. But first, let’s talk about Jerusalem.

Ancient Jerusalem, which is still there, was located atop the watershed between the Judean hills to the west and the Judean desert to the east. It’s at an elevation of about 2,600 feet. On the eastern edge of the city is the Kidron Valley, which separates it from the Mount of Olives. On the western edge of the city is the Hinnom Valley. The walls and massive gates of what is called the Old City date to the Ottoman (or Turkish) period of domination during the sixteenth century. The

Old City is divided into four quarters, the Muslim, the Christian, the Armenian, and the Jewish. The Old City is home to important sites, including the Temple Mount, which was the site of the two ancient Israelite and Jewish temples, the Western Wall where Jews still come to pray to this day, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which many believe to be the site where Jesus was crucified, and the Muslim shrine called the Dome of the Rock. Much of Jerusalem is built from a gleaming whitish stone that is still available as an inexpensive building material, and when you stand on a hillside to the east and look down at it, the view is unbelievably stunning.

Jerusalem has a very long history. Archeological evidence indicates that it was first settled in the early Bronze age, about 3000 B.C. By 1800 B.C., the settlement had fortifications and a system for maintaining fresh water. When Israelites arrived in Canaan, Jerusalem was very small. During and after King David's reign, the city began to expand. Solomon, David's son, built the first Temple. In the 8th century B.C., the city expanded significantly. After the Assyrians were unable to take the city in 701 B.C., the Babylonians succeeded in conquering it – and destroying much of it – in 586 B.C. They took a good portion of the inhabitants into exile, but the king of Persia allowed them to return in 538 B.C. The Persians rebuilt much of the city. True political stability didn't come until about 301 B.C. when the successors of Alexander the Great dramatically grew the

population. It was then that Jerusalem began to become a major urban center. King Herod, the older Herod, who was a Jew, from about 37 to 4 B.C., rebuilt Jerusalem as a Greco-Roman city. He had the Temple and its massive surrounding complex rebuilt, using Jewish, near Eastern, Greek, and Roman architectural techniques. Jerusalem then became arguably the most beautiful city in the greater eastern Mediterranean area, and it had perhaps eight giant gates. Herod built a massive royal palace. A large Roman garrison was built in Jerusalem.

At the time of Jesus, the population was over 80,000, perhaps as much as 120,000, and it was still under the domain of the vast Roman Empire, which at its height stretched from what is now Great Britain to north Africa. The Temple in Jerusalem was visited by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims every year. Much of the reason why Jerusalem was a famous international city was the result of the religious fervor of millions of Jews who lived throughout the Roman Empire. It was their holy city. The dominant languages in Jerusalem were Aramaic, which Jesus spoke, Hebrew, the religious language of the Jews, and Greek, which was spoken by about 15% of the population, often the most highly educated people. The famous Roman scientist Pliny the Elder called Jerusalem "*the most famous city in the East*". The primary source of pride and prestige for the city was the Second Temple, the only place where Jews could offer animal sacrifice. Religious visitors,

who came to celebrate Passover and other Jewish holidays, were charged a Temple tax, and this influx of cash, along with money from commerce that was carried on in the city, allowed numerous giant residences and public buildings to be constructed. Archeological excavations have uncovered frescoed walls, mosaic floors, imported pots and dishes, and numerous other luxury goods from around the Roman Empire and from outside the Roman Empire. Jerusalem was famous all across the Roman Empire. Let's look at a piece of our first quote, from Psalm 122:

*Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together,
4 to which the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.
5 There thrones for judgment were set,
the thrones of the house of David.*

Psalm 122 is one of fifteen Psalms that are all subtitled Psalms of “Ascent”; these fifteen appear to be prayers offered by pilgrims going to places like Jerusalem. The theme of 122 is that Jerusalem is the site of the house of the Lord. It praises the safety that Jerusalem offers - and the central role it has in the lives of believers.

In our second quote, Mary and Joseph have made the trip to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. It's a pilgrimage that they made every year – which showed the depth of their devotion to God. The celebration would last seven days. But

after three days, they realize that they've lost track of their kid, Jesus. This isn't as ridiculous as it sounds, and it doesn't mean that they were crappy parents. People made the trip in large caravans, and adults regularly looked after each other's children for days on end, and they assumed that Jesus was with someone else. When they confront their boy, he says to them: *"Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"* Jesus is saying hey, I'm here in Jerusalem, the home of our faith, the home of God, and so, of course, I couldn't pass up being in the Temple. Later in the passage we are told that because of this experience, *"Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man."* We see that Jesus' ministry starts when he is a boy. And it starts in Jerusalem.

In our third quote, Jesus is about to ascend into Heaven, leaving the Apostles with the task of carrying on. They will bring the faith to the farthest reaches of the known civilized world. Jesus says to them: *"you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* Notice that although they will spread out in all directions, their center of focus is and will remain Jerusalem – the home of their faith. The movement of Christianity across civilization starts in Jerusalem.

You know, as a boy, I used to imagine myself in Biblical places, and I was particularly taken by Jerusalem. I could walk in the footsteps of Jesus, of the

Apostles, of Paul the evangelist. Wherever they went, I went. Whatever they saw, I saw, and whomever they spoke to, well I could speak to them, as well. Because of them, because of where I was, I could speak to God loudly and clearly, and God would answer back. Most of all, I was right where it all started.

Imagine those pilgrims who poured into Jerusalem each year for Passover. The travelers, as they entered the area, would make a long, difficult ascent from Jericho to the Holy City of Jerusalem. It ended near the Mount of Olives, and then they were presented with a vista that was totally amazing. Across the Kidron Valley was Jerusalem. Many would stand on the Mount of Olives, staring down at the gleaming stone city, dominated by the bright gold-embellished Temple. The Temple stood high above the Old City, at the center of a gigantic white stone platform. It was in the most holy spot in the Jewish world.

Once people got into the city, they would find a maze of dusty streets. The place was packed with people. There were open-air shops, filled with potters, bakers, tailors, carpenters, and metal workers. People sold fruits, vegetables, fish, jewelry. You could buy local wine to drink. During the time of Jesus, there were about 500 synagogues in the city. Most of the city was crowded and noisy, the streets lined with one-and-two-story houses. But there were also broad avenues outside the poorer parts of the city, with elaborate Roman style markets. This is

where people could buy luxury goods of perfumes, silk, gold, silver, ivory, incense. Many of the merchants of luxury goods were quite wealthy. For one thing, they would supply the Temple with priestly vestments, incense, special wood for altar fires, and sacred ornaments. They would also ship all over the Empire.

Visitors in town for Passover would find lodging in an inn or in a private home. But many would stay in tents outside the city or in homes in nearby villages like Bethany. This is where Jesus and his Apostles stayed during the tail end of his ministry of earth. But here we are, right now, in Jerusalem. It's where it all started. All of our Scripture is centered there. The place still exists. It's been partly destroyed and rebuilt, over and over, conquered and reconquered since before the time of Christ, and many times after the life of Christ. It was a land occupied largely by Muslims for quite some time. The new city of Jerusalem has exploded in size since World War II. The Old City still sits there, though, at the base of the foothills, stunning in its age and beauty. It's difficult for us as Americans to imagine a place that has been continuously occupied, and held high as a holy place, for millennia.

As a boy, I saw myself there. My faith was a very real, tangible thing to me. It wasn't just that I believed. It's that my very core was my belief in God, in Jesus, in the knowledge that I must serve God and others, that love was the most important thing that humans have to offer to other humans, that there was never

a reason to worry, that we need to turn to God when somehow, we can't keep worry away, that we must uphold what is good and fight what is evil, but that in the end it is God who judges, that I must tell the truth and keep my word, that when I give to the church and to other people, I do it in secret and not so that others will think a lot of me, that I should affirm others and always try to speak well of others, that I can do so much more as a person if I have faith, and that whatever gifts God gives me, I must use them in his name. I could believe all of this all the more strongly if I saw myself standing in the center of God's city, of Jerusalem.

My point is that this sanctuary is our little Jerusalem, our holy city, the place where we come each Sunday morning to talk to God. To the Jews, as well as the first followers of Christ, Jerusalem was a symbolic home of God, a place where they could make pilgrimages and greet God. It was an extremely expensive trip, and some Jews could only do it once in their lifetimes. But we can come here every week. Yes, of course, God is everywhere, and not just here. The Jews knew that God wasn't only in Jerusalem, and we know that God is within us no matter how far we stray from this church. But when we are here, we can stand where Jesus, the Apostles, Paul the evangelist, and the first followers of Christ stood. We can be present for the birth of our faith. See yourself moving outward, in the footsteps of those first evangelists - and walk with God. And walk in strength. Amen.