

Taking a Good Look Around
Psalm 48:1-3, 8-14
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I got a new pair of glasses recently. What a relief. My old ones were so scratched I could hardly see anything. When I put the new ones on, everything was so clear once again that it reminded me of the very first time I got glasses in the fifth grade. When I put on my very first pair of glasses at that optometrist's office back in Atlanta so many years ago, I thought my head was going to explode. Suddenly, I could see what the world was really supposed to look like. I could now see everything so sharply, clearly, newly, every leaf, every crack in the sidewalk, every traffic signal my parents were ignoring. I never knew, of course, that I wasn't seeing everything the way it was supposed to be seen until I had that eye exam, and what a difference it has made. The world is a different place when you can really see it.

Maybe you have had the similar experience of when you arrive in a new place, maybe like the very first time you got off the plane in Costa Rica. You go around inspecting everything, marveling at colors and shapes and textures, probably seeing things that people who have lived their whole lives in that place have never seen. Many years ago when I was living in Pittsburgh, I worked at non-profit agency and we developed as our annual benefit a fun event called The Pride of Pittsburgh Treasure Hunt, and what the treasure hunters were looking for were

the historical or cultural landmarks that even though they had driven by them hundreds or even thousands of times, they had never really seen them, the hidden treasures that made their city great. And I got to write the clues because, not having grown up in Pittsburgh, I saw the city with different eyes, and could spot the gargoyle on the corner of a church, or the view of a monument if you stopped to look down an alley between two buildings. And we were able to not only raise a little money, but also help people appreciate what was good and beautiful about their city.

Something similar is happening in Psalm 48, only the city is Jerusalem, and the treasure hunters are pilgrims from the countryside, not longtime residents. Many scholars believe that Psalm 48 was likely used as part of the festivities celebrating the New Year, and that the way the city of Jerusalem is described is from a pilgrim's perspective, newcomers getting their first view, their first experience of this place that God had ordained and blessed as the divine point of revelation to the whole world. "As we have heard, so we have seen in the city of the Lord of Hosts." Back in 1941, Julian Morgenstern, the dean of Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, did exhaustive research on this psalm, even calculating the direction from which the pilgrims had likely come based on what is described in the psalm. And his dating of the psalm puts it in the time after the exile, when people are returning from Babylon, so that the people seeing it and praising it really are coming there for the first time and beholding it in all its splendor,

remembering its glory years, and looking forward to its prominence in the future. These would have been people born in exile who had only heard the stories about it, or people too young to remember the city when they were forced to leave. And they are coming towards it with new glasses. They were on the Joy of Jerusalem Treasure Hunt.

And so they are invited to behold the city, walk through it, check out the towers and the ramparts and the citadels, look into every nook and cranny, and ponder God's steadfast love and power, so that it may make such an impression on them that they will not fail to "tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever." Remember that it was precisely the failure of so many earlier generations to acknowledge God that led to the fall of the city and the exile from which they are returning. It is no wonder the psalm concludes the way it does. God will, and God must be, "our guide forever." As much as it is a celebration of the city, it is also a warning not to forget again, a warning issued each new year's day to value the city that was almost lost to you, and the God who restored both it and you.

Now, there may not be quite as much at stake for us today as the potential loss and destruction of a city, but the old saying remains true that the church is always one generation away from extinction. At least in our formulation of the church, we are not Christians by birth, but by choice. We don't track our religious heritage through one of our parents. And even for those traditions which

automatically reckon the children of believers as believers, if those children abandon the faith, although they may still appear on the church rolls, they don't appear in the church pews. And a generation passes away, and then another, and then another. In the end, ours is a faith of choice, both the first choice to believe, and the choice every day to keep following, to keep telling "the next generation that this is our God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever."

Tonight we celebrate ECF's newest members, people who have made a choice to be part of this great city which God has established, which God will uphold, over which God is truly faithful. Perhaps it is telling that Psalm 48 doesn't actually name the city as Jerusalem, but rather uses the term Zion, which encompasses so much more than a specific geographic place. You see, Zion is a symbol of the holy habitation, the place where God dwells, and for the Christian faith, that place is the church, and in the hearts of believers, and the places they choose to congregate together. And so this place, and this people, is also Mount Zion. We are the holy city, the holy mountain, to which pilgrims still come, with their new eyes of faith, seeking all the treasures contained within. Maybe my favorite verse from this psalm is "We ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple." How amazing it is that after all these thousands of years, from that ancient city to this place tonight, God is still our guide, and has led us here to remember what God has done and to tell the next generation, and the one after that and the one after that. But it is so easy to take all that for granted, to think

someone else will tell the story, carry on the tradition, keep opening the doors every Sunday. And pretty soon, we don't realize how badly our eyesight is failing, and we no longer see with joy and wonder the treasures we pass by every day.

And so it is good every so often to read Psalm 48 and “ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple.” So tonight, instead of an invitation to “walk about Zion” and count its towers and its ramparts and its citadels, I want to invite you to walk around this room, among these people, and really take a good hard look at everything you see here. Try to look at it as if you've never been here before, like you have arrived for the first time, or like you have new glasses on, or have been invited to go on a Treasure Hunt. And in a few minutes, we'll come back together, and I hope you will share with the rest of your fellow pilgrims something of what you evidence you saw of God's blessing, what made you rejoice like the Psalmist, or what convicts you to “tell the next generation, that this is God, our God forever and ever.” Amen.