

## SECURITY 101

Pentecost 6 Year B

2 Sam. 5:1-5, 9-10; Ps. 48; 2 Cor. 12:2-10; Mk. 6:1-13

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Security. Today there is an increasing emphasis on security—especially in the last year or so with the onslaught of COVID-19. Security is prevalent in so many areas of our lives. On the broader scale, we are concerned about the security of our nation—issues such as refugees, COVID-19, military security, industrial security and so on. Closer to home we have seen cities and states in lock-down while we try to eradicate the viral threat that's all around us—travel restrictions, COVID checks, interstate travel passes etc.

On a more personal level, we're concerned about personal security—in the home, on the city streets and so on. And then, of course there is cyber security, with concerns such as identity theft, spam, phishing scams (on our phones as well as on our computers) and social media (FYI: Don't do the questionnaires on Facebook! They're just gathering data about YOU!). It never ends. Just when we think we're safe in one aspect of our lives, some other area crops up as a security threat and then something else needs to be locked down.

In the midst of all our concerns about security, Psalm 48 calls us the source of ultimate security.

Psalm 48 is one of the several Songs of Zion scattered throughout the Psalter (Psalms 46, 76, 84, 87, 122). They sing the praise of the great capital city of Israel, because God has blessed her beyond imagination. This is a combination of patriotism and religion. It not only swells with pride and confidence over Jerusalem because God establishes it forever. (v 8). It also gives us an opportunity to think about the danger of placing too much confidence in the supposed security of our nation, or our homes or the multitudes of electronic devices that constantly invade our lives. As we, in the West, celebrate our various freedoms—and are very grateful for them—Psalm 48 and particularly the history that followed the writing of this Psalm, provide a cautionary tale for all who are proud of their so-called security and are sure that God is on your side.

As we proceed into this patriotic Psalm, it's important to note that it is first and last a psalm about God, not about Jerusalem. If Israel (and all subsequent singers of such patriotic songs) had remembered that, things might not have gone so badly for them in the end. I say "first and last," because the first and last verses, verses 1 and 14 bracket the Psalm with praise for and confidence in God. "*Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised,*" and "*...this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever.*" (an echo of Psalm 23, where God is the Shepherd King of Israel), even to the end.

Within the brackets of that comforting confession, Psalm 48 turns immediately and insistently to the glory of Jerusalem and the mountain on which it is built. Now, when I say “mountain”, the psalmist here is delving into somewhat poetic and exaggerated language. Yes, Jerusalem was on a hill, above the surrounding plain, but it could hardly be called a mountain. But such is poetic and often patriotic language.

For the psalmist, God’s greatness is to be found quintessentially in Jerusalem. *“Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain,<sup>2</sup> beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth.”*

This Psalm can be broken up into four sections—the beauty of Zion as God’s impenetrable citadel in verses 2 and 3; the futility of enemy attacks against Jerusalem, verses 4-7; Zion’s joy over God’s saving acts in defeating the enemy, in verses 9-11; and singing the glories of Zion’s impregnability, in verses 12-13. Right in the middle is verse 8 with its rock-solid assurance that “God establishes Jerusalem/Zion forever.” A comment on its security, because it has been established by God.

The close identification of patriotism with religious conviction can be a very dangerous thing. Some scholars think that Psalm 48 might have been written on the occasion of the defeat of Sennacherib described in II Kings 19. When Sennacherib mocked God, King Hezekiah asked God to defeat him, *“So now, O Lord our God, save us, I pray you, from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone.”* God did just that, declaring in verse 34, *“For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.”*

Because of that defeat, many Jews came to believe that God’s protection of this city would forever save them from any defeat. That’s the confidence voiced in Psalm 48. But, as the Orthodox theologian, Patrick Henry Reardon says, “Their presumptuous confidence in this illusion grew into an arrogant, almost magical audacity at odds with earlier warnings they had received from the prophet Micah. Unrepentant sin inevitably invites the judgment of God, even on his chosen city (Micah 3:12).”

Then, more than a century later, Jeremiah repeated this warning when Nebuchadnezzar led Babylon against Jerusalem. Reardon goes on to write, “So strong and popular was their rash, magical presumption of Jerusalem’s invincibility that Jeremiah’s words fell largely on the deaf ears of a people not convinced of their need for conversion. God would protect his holy city..., so why repent?”

So, it happened that Jerusalem fell and the Jews found themselves in Babylon, where they said in Psalm 137, *“By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion... our captors demanded song of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’ How can we*

*sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land?"* How could this terrible thing happen, given the confidence of Psalm 48? How could God allow such devastation to befall his beloved people?

The Jewish nation wrestled with that question for centuries, as have Christians (think of Paul in Romans 9-11). There has been no agreement among Christians. But as early as the late fourth Century AD, an Egyptian Father distinguished 4 meanings of the name Jerusalem in the Bible: historically, the city of the Jews; allegorically, the church of Christ; analogically, the heavenly city of God; and topologically, as the soul of humankind. In other words, Jerusalem is more than Jerusalem. And as such, we can apply the moral, if you like, of Psalm 48, in many areas of our lives—and not just in relation to national or political security.

Again, this is a larger question than one can deal with here, but this Psalm does clearly warn us against identifying our country, our city, even our cause with God himself. Even the city in which God chose to dwell in Old Testament days finally fell because of unrepentant sin. It happened to them—it has happened to one empire after another throughout history—and it can happen to us. Patriotism of any kind can be a good thing—our country, our city, our Christian ideology, ...our football team. But presuming that God is on our side, no matter what we do or what we think or believe is right, is the kind of rash, magical presumption that can lead to ruin.

Don't just think of it in just national or political terms. Also think of it in terms of deeply held preconceptions or expectations, whether they be ideological, cultural, biblical or theological, that may be challenged from time to time. For some, much of what we might imagine to be a citadel on a hill—our particular biblical understanding or theological perspective—may turn out to be just as frail as Jerusalem, ultimately was.

A few weeks ago, Gavin preached a sermon on leadership, and spoke of it within the context of a calling another minister following my departure. As we think of the nature of the church or ministry in general—particularly in this process as you contemplate the future ministry of this congregation—I'm sure that everyone will have their own preconceptions of what these terms imply and will look for those expectations to be met. But be careful. Don't let your preconceptions and expectations become a citadel on a hill.

Your minister, for example, both now and for whoever that may turn out to be in the future, is not here to meet your expectations or preconceptions, he or she is here to challenge them and to draw you into a much wider and deeper picture of God than you might otherwise have. We all come to church and to God with all kinds of preconceptions about our faith and expectations about the faith of others. Sometimes those

preconceptions and expectations need to be challenged. Sometimes they're right, sometimes they're dead wrong and we need to be open to seeing this.

If you only hear or watch or read what you already agree with, how do you grow as a Christian? If you only see God or your Christian faith through one shade of spectacles, how do you expand your understanding?

As the people of Jerusalem *failed* to do, we must constantly examine ourselves before God. That's part of what we do every Sunday in worship—not just in our prayers of adoration and confession, but in our weekly celebration of Holy Communion as we regularly return to the source of our life and our security—to regularly seek union and communion with God and one another.

Our deeply held beliefs and practices may, at times, need to be challenged and even brought into question. It's very easy, in all of these things, to become complacent. That attitude didn't work well for Jerusalem and neither will it work well for you. The security we think we have—whether it be national, political, personal, ideological, biblical or theological, is never going to be as secure as we think it is. Our ultimate security, is not in the things that pass away—the transient things—as we heard recently. Our ultimate security is in God—the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of Moses and Aaron, the God of Peter, Paul and Mary (no not the singing group—but maybe, who knows) and yes, the God of Jerusalem. He is the God who is “forever and ever” and “will be our guide forever.”

Whatever your circumstances may be—sickness, loneliness, trying circumstances of all kinds, troubles, persecution, even finally death—and in choosing another minister—in all of these things, God is our guide. He is our Guide who takes us by the hand, to direct us in the way we should go, so that nothing can take us away from his security.

So, let us sing our national anthems, celebrate our freedoms, support our military, and rejoice in our beautiful country—with all its foibles and paradoxes. Let us rejoice in our church and our life of faith, with all its variety, with all its political and theological nuances and inconsistencies. But let's also remember the beginning and end and middle of Psalm 48. Our only hope—our only security—is God, the God who entered history again and again to help his people. It is to him we must constantly look.

Let us pledge our ultimate allegiance to the God who became one of those people so that all the world could be part of “the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, beautifully dressed for her husband... the wife of the Lamb (Revelations 21:2 and 9).”  
*...this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever.”*

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.