

**Stanford Memorial Church
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**LIVING IN JERUSALEM
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**Hebrew Scripture: Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18
Gospel Lesson: Luke 13.31-35**

There are many Jerusalems. The name “Jerusalem” is thought to mean something like “foundation of peace” or “possession of peace.” While the city has undoubtedly enjoyed satisfying years of peace within its walls, there have also been a succession of battles to determine who would rule this tumultuous city. Over the centuries the claims and counterclaims among religions, as to which one may rightly claim the ownership of Jerusalem, have only increased.

Around the fifteenth century B.C., Joshua led the Israelites to the first conquest of the Jerusalem (Joshua 10.1-15). Even at this time, the city had existed for several centuries prior to the Canaanites, whom Joshua defeated. A few centuries later King David, recognizing the historical significance of the city, deliberately designated Jerusalem as the religious/political capital of his kingdom. His affair with Bathsheba, unfortunately, rendered him unfit to construct a mighty temple to the glory of God. This was accomplished, following his death, by his son, Solomon. For several generations the Israelites treasured their City of David as well as Solomon’s magnificent temple.

By the time Jesus arrived on the scene, however, Jerusalem’s reputation had been considerably reduced to that of being a cantankerous center for agitation and rebelliousness—in the backwaters of the Roman Empire. The gospel lesson informs us that Jesus, at the zenith of his ministry, was on the way to Jerusalem. A group of Pharisees, however, attempted to discourage him, saying, “Get away from here for Herod wants to kill you” (Luke 13.31b). These words may strike us as a bit strange and surprising, especially in light of the current furor over Mel Gibson’s highly publicized movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. The recurring criticism of the film, in addition to objections to the excessive portrayal of violence and suffering, has been that the Jews essentially bear the responsibility for the death of Jesus; and that Pilate and his colleagues were, at best, distinterested bystanders. It is an ancient and pervasive criticism that has fueled centuries of inexcusable, violent persecution of Jewish communities by Christians. This makes the gospel lesson all the more arresting, for the Pharisees, the most religiously dedicated of the Jews, appear to be giving Jesus some helpful advice. In essence they are saying, “Get out of here. Your popularity and fame are upsetting Herod, the one who had all the male children under two years of age killed at the time of your birth—and he is probably more committed than ever to killing you.” Jesus essentially discounts their concern and apprehension with his challenging response, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘ Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow,

and on the third day I finish my work.” Calling Herod a fox, a readily recognized term of opprobrium, certainly undercuts any popular notion of a meek and gentle Jesus. Then Jesus makes an exclamation, which sounds almost like God speaking, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing” (Luke 13.34)! Jesus seems to be putting his finger on the paradox of this beleaguered, second-rate outpost of the Roman empire. He projects a vision far greater than that of simply being a political/religious center. Utilizing the simple but beguiling imagery of a hen and her brood of chickens, Jesus portrays the true Jerusalem—a place of the spirit, a place of acceptance, nurture, and compassion. “And yet,” the divine voice seems to be saying, “I have sent you prophets, men and women of God, to provide spiritual direction, to speak the truth, to extend care to those in need, but you have rejected them . . . you have repeatedly stoned them.” Moreover, Jesus recognized that he was standing on the threshold of the same fate himself, another messenger of God to be killed, in the name of God, by those dwelling in the city of David and worshipping in the magnificent temples.

The vision Jesus provided of a spiritual Jerusalem became a popular motif within the emerging Christian community. A couple of generations following the death of Jesus, the writer John, in *The Revelation*, the last book of the Bible, gives classic expression to the true nature of Jerusalem. Time has come to an end, evil has been expelled, and all of existence dwells in harmony with the Creator. Within this context of a new creation, John exclaims,

“I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God’s people, and God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away’” (Rev. 21.2-4).

Over the centuries a number of religious landlords have attempted to harmonize

the physical reality of Jerusalem with the spiritual vision articulated by Jesus and placed at the end of time by John in his book of *The Revelation*. Around 313 A.D., the Roman emperor Constantine celebrated his miraculous victory in Rome by issuing the Edict of Milan, legalizing Christian worship throughout the kingdom. This was quite a victory for the faith, considering Christians only comprised around one-fifth of the population at the time and, of course, they obtained Jerusalem in the process.

Three centuries after Constantine, in 638 A.D., the Muslims conquered Jerusalem, and the first major Islamic monument, The Dome of the Rock, was completed fifty years later, in 691. As the rulers of the city, the Muslims followed a policy that seems rather close to the spirit of Jesus and his words. Although Christians were in the majority in Jerusalem, the Muslims never insisted—as the earlier religious landlords had done—that the inhabitants must convert to their faith. While anyone could convert if he or she wished, no one was coerced. Indeed, Christians and Jews are referred to in the Quran as

“people of an earlier revelation,” and a Muslim who encounters a Jew or a Christian is instructed by the Quran to say, “We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you; for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we all surrender ourselves” (Quran 29.46). This verse came to mind a couple of years ago when I heard a so-called Islamic scholar interviewed on a fundamentalist Christian radio show, in the context of the post 9/11 hysteria. He confidently declared that Allah of Islam is not the same as the God of Christianity. Apparently he had somehow overlooked this verse from the Quran.

Except for about ninety years in the eleventh century, when the Christians retook Jerusalem in the First Crusade, the city has remained in Islamic hands—until less than a century ago when in 1948 it became a part of the nation of Israel. During the Islamic era the vision of a spiritual Jerusalem, expressed by Jesus and elaborated by John in The Revelation, had become less and less associated with the geographical city in the Near East. Over four hundred years ago small bands of pilgrims and Anabaptists risked their lives to come to a new and little known land to establish—what they frequently referred to as—a New Jerusalem. It was a spiritual vision combined with the spirit of the Enlightenment that became the template for what would become a new nation known as the United States of America. Perhaps no one captured the essence of this movement better than Benjamin Franklin when he stated a month before he died, “I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable service we render to him is doing good to his other children.” One instance of Franklin living out this creed became evident during the July 4 celebrations in 1788. For the first time, in keeping with the arrangements made by Franklin, “the clergy of different Christian denominations, with the rabbi of the Jews, walked arm in arm” at the head of the parade. (See *Benjamin Franklin, An American Life*, by Walter Isaacson, p. 468).

Within the panorama of this vast background, stretching almost from the beginning of civilization to the present, we might ask, “What is the new Jerusalem for our time and what does it mean to live in it?” Of course the city of Jerusalem itself is very much alive, though quite evidently less than well—as the continuing fighting between Jews and Arabs produces ever more tragic deaths. If I had a magic wand, I would, as many have suggested, declare Jerusalem an independent, international city, along the lines of Monaco, or Liechtenstein. It would be a kind of spiritual United Nations center, something like the center Bishop Swing, the Episcopal bishop of San Francisco, has been advocating, but of course with much deeper historical roots. The three great monotheistic faiths would readily feel as home, as Muslims make their way to the Dome of the Rock, Jews to the western wall, and Christians to the Church of the Sepulcher. Room would also be made available to other groups as well—Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians—if they wished to participate. There would be no prince or grand duke in charge. Instead the ordering of life together would be along the democratic lines advocated by the pilgrims, the puritans and the Anabaptists in their quest for the New Jerusalem.

While this vision of the city of Jerusalem as a spiritual United Nations may not be realized in our time, it might encourage us to explore possibilities for a more version of living in Jerusalem. On a modest level, I feel we have tried to take some steps in this direction through the Spiritual Care Service at Stanford Medical Center. When I first came to the hospital our department consisted of two chaplains, six CPE students, and about 40 volunteers. All were Christian. Our major concern had to do with reigning in the fundamentalists who felt they had a mandate to convert patients so they would not go to hell after they died. I pointed out to them that hospital patients are in a captive position, and any attempt to proselyte them was not only unethical but unacceptable. A few got the message, while others decided to resign; and I believe our volunteer service became stronger for it.

The next issue to capture our attention had to do with patients and family members from non-Christian faith groups. We made it a practice to call on patients of all faith groups, informing them at the outset that we were not there to convert them but to provide whatever service and comfort might be helpful. Several declined any service we had to offer, but others accepted our outreach and often expressed appreciation—especially when we demonstrated our familiarity with some of their practices. This might entail such things as knowing for orthodox Jews a body should be buried within twenty-four hours of death, or that for Muslims only women prepared the body of a dead woman for burial and the same practice was true for men. Yet, feeling we could do more, we began to expand the interfaith composition of our volunteers. Our first new group came from the Jewish tradition. Then, about four years ago, we reached out in earnest to clergy of various faith groups. As a result, we have gone from 40 to over 225 volunteers, and we now have volunteers from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islam, Jewish, and Sikh faith groups.

The value of our approach was strikingly confirmed for me last spring, when we had an Iman come and chant scriptures from the Quran in the hospital atrium. As the people assembled one person attracted a great deal of attention, an Islamic woman who had a recent organ transplant. Surrounded by four or five members of her anxious family, she appeared so frail and weak—at the door of death itself. But as the Iman chanted from the Quran the woman and her family seemed to be infused with a new spirit. By the time the service concluded, they were totally transformed.

As we related to other faith groups, in our attempt to live within the spiritual Jerusalem espoused by Jesus, we have tried to emphasize that what we have in common is so much more important, and of greater significance, than that which separates us. This was illustrated in the most recent issue of our departmental newsletter, *Spiritual Care Notes*, in which we printed, with a brief commentary, five versions of the Golden Rule. How could any one not be struck by their commonality. For Buddhists it is, “Hurt not others with that which pains you.” Christianity of course states, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” The Hindu version is, “Treat others as you yourself would be treated.” In Islam the expression is, “Do unto all men as you would wish to have done.” And Jewish tradition declares, “What you yourself hate do to no man.”

Reaching out to other faith groups, as fellow citizens of our spiritual Jerusalem, has been educational, at times challenging, but almost invariably nurturing. Rather than developing a common-denominator, faith of least resistance, my sense is that each has felt more confirmed in his or her own faith. So it came as something of a pleasant surprise to discover recently that among her religious beliefs that Jane Stanford wished carved into the walls of Stanford Memorial Church was one that states, “Whichever form of religion offers the greatest comfort, the greatest solace, is the form which should be adopted.” (*Stanford Report*, Feb. 25). She seemed to have a pretty good idea of what it means to live in Jerusalem, and may we as well. Amen