

From the feast of Thanksgiving to the frenzy of Black Friday, the holy day season is on the move. We're going to Christmas, but before we get to that holy day (and before I go any further, one spiritual practice I've decided to adopt this Advent is to say "holy day" instead of "holiday." I'm not aiming to score any culture war points, but simply to be mindful of whence "holiday" came; whether it be Hanukkah or Christmas or even Kwanzaa; we're pointing to a whole new world and a different way; a different way of being human; a different way of being in community; a holy way witnessed on a holy day. I invite you to join me and have a happy holy day.) Before we get to that holy day, we journey through the wilderness of Advent. On that pilgrimage, we're going to sing the Psalms because the Psalms give us a glimpse of that new world and from that glimpse, they stir up a longing within us for God's new world wherein in the words of Julian of Norwich, "All is well, and all is well, and all manner of things shall be well."

We're not there yet; we have a ways to go, but once we begin the journey, we develop momentum; one step invites the next step, and the next, and the next, and the next thing you know, look at how far we've come. We never thought it as possible, but now: "I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." Our feet are standing firmly within your gates, O Jerusalem! Jerusalem - built as a city that is bound firmly together."

Jerusalem is more than a city; Jerusalem is a way of being; a way of being human; a way of being community. A whole new world takes its first breath when we say the name - Jerusalem.

Jerusalem literally means "city of peace." History tells a far different tale as do current events, yet even that contrast between the vision and the reality witnesses to God's coming holy day. We expect more in Jerusalem; more love; more hope; more peace; and expecting more is the first step on the journey to more.

We're not there yet; we have a ways to go; and the pilgrimage we begin when we take our first step toward Jerusalem releases a process of transformation that makes all things (including us) new.

The Psalmist witnesses to that transformation when he invites us to: "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."

In light of that witness, 2 days after Black Friday, 24 days before Christmas, on this first Sunday in Advent, I ask you (and I ask me) is peace within us? Are we citizens of the city of shalom looking forward and living into the vision of "the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem," or we people living in darkness still yearning to see a great light? Are we still huddled masses yearning to be free, or do we dare to rise up and throw off the sin that ensnares us and the shame that enslaves us? Is peace within us?

"Most of us have half-a-dozen or so favorite anxieties, like bitter sweets we suck on endlessly. We would be frightened to be deprived of them. Jesus challenges us to go beyond the fear of letting go of anxiety, the fear we have of peace itself." (Laurence Freeman, "Verse and Voice" 11.19.13. Sojo.net)

Our Advent journey gives us the time we need to face that fear; that fear of peace; that fear that trembles, "Who would I be if I weren't afraid of that? Who would I be if I weren't striving for that? Who would we be if we weren't afraid but instead had "peace within?"

Noble ideals benefit from practical examples, so here are three glimpses of what citizens of the city of peace who have "peace within" look like:

1. A chilly November afternoon at John Farrell Stadium, West Chester University, during the final minutes of a dominating NCAA Division Two Playoff win! Since the game was over, the older man a few benches below us got up to leave. As he walked down the steps, a glove fell from his pocket. He did not know it had fallen (and on a day like that Saturday, he would have missed it!). Instantly, a number of people on either side of the aisle called out to him (we did not know him; no one called him by name; he was simply a fellow fan in need). One man even got up, picked up the glove,

caught up to the man and gave it to him. "Peace be within you."

2. The city of brotherly love, a city that is notorious for how it treats people, on a bitterly cold Thanksgiving morning in the park before the Philadelphia Museum of Art. As we thought warm thoughts in vain, an iPod slipped out of a pocket and fell to the ground. We did not know it had fallen, but a fellow frozen parade-goer picked it up and said, "Hey, I think you dropped this." "Peace be within you."

3. A nursing home in Whitehall: I brought an icon I purchased on my pilgrimage to Jerusalem to a Russian Orthodox couple; icons play a key role in Orthodox spirituality and I hoped seeing it would bless them. They misunderstood my intent and thought I was giving it to them as a gift. Should I correct them, or should I give? "Peace be within you."

Christmas is coming. What do you want? What are you longing for? A new world is waiting to be born. Until it is, we journey as pilgrims and our journey will transform us; we can behave differently because we believe differently. Since any day may be the holy day; therefore, everyday is a holy day; everyday offers us the possibility of making a difference because we are becoming different. We are becoming the answer to our prayers for the peace of Jerusalem. We are discovering peace with us.

Our Advent journey towards that holy day begins here at our Lord's Table, for it is here that the pilgrim, Jesus Christ, says to us, and through us says to this world; this world that knows so much of anxiety and fear and injustice and despair; to us and through us, Jesus offers his holy day blessing to this world as he sees Jerusalem in us and says, "Peace be within you." Amen.