



Yet in thy Dark Streets *Shineth*

A SERIES OF SERMONS
FOR ADVENT

JERUSALEM | NAZARETH | BETHLEHEM

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WEEK 1: JERUSALEM

SERMON

- The **Sermon** can be delivered by one reader or three readers:

Note: The sermon is structured in such a way that it may be delivered by three persons, usually representing past, present and future insights.

The lines for the chief speaker, the person representing the PRESENT, are in regular type.

The lines for the person representing the PAST are in boldface type.

The lines for the person representing the FUTURE are in italics.

LINES PRINTED IN ALL CAPITAL LETTERS ARE READ BY ALL THREE SPEAKERS IN UNISON.

The sermon may, of course, be presented instead by a single preacher speaking everything, ignoring the typefaces.

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The season of Advent calls us to a journey. We stand at a juncture here

where we may look back to the past and what the Lord has done for his people there to make this present possible.

We look also to the future, to the time of fulfillment, when the Lord will come again.

Advent is a time of increasing light.

Watch it begin to glow, even in these dark streets.

Let us begin today's journey in a valley—the valley named Kidron. To one side the mountain called Olivette slopes back away from us, its olive trees and presses and walls, remnants from an even more ancient time, still dark in the morning shadows. Ahead of us, to the west, illumined by the amber light of the morning sun, our chosen path winds its serpentine way up Zion's holy mountain to the City of the Lord—

JERUSALEM!

The road is busy—nothing new for so ancient a road to so noble a place.

On this very road Melchizedek, the priest-king of God Most High, greeted the victorious Abraham, leading him into the city to partake of a festive meal. King David trod upon these stones to conquer this city of the Jebusites and moved his capital here from Hebron. Stripped to his tunic, he danced before the Ark of the Covenant, taken up in the religious fervor felt when the city of the king became the City of the Lord. Quarried stones were brought by this path, and gold and jewels and cedars of Lebanon—once by Solomon, once by Nehemiah, and once by Herod—to build the great Temple of Abraham's God.

There, you can see the masons now, hauling another great stone through the gates to continue work on Solomon's Colonnade.

Years from now the first Christians will listen to Peter and James and John in that Colonnade,

but for now, what with Herod still alive, and Zebedee just now learning to mend his father's nets on the shores of Lake Galilee, the building here goes on.

Work was begun here by Herod over twenty-six years ago,

and will not stop for nearly another sixty-five.

Six years after that, not a stone of it will remain upon another.

The queen of Sheba, bedecked in silk and reeking of perfume, was carried upon a litter to visit Solomon by this way. One of her litter carriers tripped on a peacock just over this hill, almost spilling his precious cargo. You should have heard her carry on.

Upon this road Babylonian hordes marched into the city, and slaves marched out to Babylon.

Ptolemy, general under the great Alexander, approached Jerusalem by this road and claimed the city as his own. Antiochus IV of Syria and Judas Maccabeus,

Herod of Israel and Titus of Rome,

Godfrey of Bouillon and Saladin the Muslim in years to come, Suleiman the Magnificent of Turkey and Richard the Lionheart of Britain,

Hasmonean,

Jebusite,

Crusader,

Jew,

Arab,

Persian,

Idumean,

Babylonian,

Egyptian,

Sumerian,

Roman,

Palestinian and Israeli,

and Magi

—through the gates which we now enter, have passed and will pass the leaders of the ages.

Within these walls kingdoms have risen and toppled;

dreams have been dreamt

and hopes have been dashed.

Our small crowd therefore is joined by the rabble of the ages

—the royal entries, the military sieges, the returning armies weighed down with the spoils of battle.

All of these are keeping beat to the steady rhythm, the endless tide of the common folk

—farmers, merchants, soldiers, carpenters, fishermen.

And the pilgrims

—surging through the gates in tempo with the seasons and the religious festivals.

The pilgrims

—crowding the streets, jamming the gates, flowing steadily through the years, waxing with the great religious festivals, waning when persecution is strong and faith is weak

—like corpuscles,

flowing through the gates from the extremities of the earth, this lifeblood of pilgrims flows here to its heart.

Release your senses now. Allow the tide of Jerusalem to wash over them. Open your eyes as we travel this ancient road. Capture the sights, file them away.

Open your ears.

Hear

the brass bells adorning the camel caravans;

listen

to the clip-clop of the burros and the flip-flap of the sandals hitting the worn limestone cobbles;

hear

the melodic trickle of water—a commodity so precious that it is hoarded in cisterns, guided through aqueducts, and channeled from springs to pools.

Then block out the noise, close your eyes and simply

... breathe.

Inhale,

and drink in the odors—the savory fragrances of Jerusalem.

Smell them

—the heady scent of wine and fig;

the strong odor of people and beast;

the cacophony of fragrances wafting on the air from the open air markets

—incense from Babylon,

spices from Persia,

oils from Rome,

grains from Egypt.

And above it all, growing steadily stronger as we near the place, smell the odor that distinguishes Jerusalem from any other city—that strange and pungent mixture of incense

and blood

and smoke

and roasting meat

that has haunted this mountain for more than a millennium.

Smell the sacrifice.

This is, after all, a city constantly in the shadow of death.

**Here the prophets prophesied ... and here the messengers of God were slain for their words.
And here the sacrifices were made**

... and are made

... and will be made.

That man ahead of us, do you see him, mopping the sweat of the climb off his brow, and now leaning over to gently stroke the ram at his side?

For seven years he has been raising that sheep—feeding it, leading it from pasture to pasture,

guarding it from predators, checking to see that no harm comes to it, that no blemish develops. Seven years.

And now he comes to slaughter it—to sacrifice it in accordance with the law.

The blood of that ram will cover the sins of his family. The sacrifice of that ram will buy back from God the life of that shepherd's newly born son.

Ages ago another man, mopping his brow after the climb up this very hill, stopped to stroke the head of his sacrifice, gently calming the young boy and saying, “Fear not, my son—God will provide a lamb.” And the altar was built, and the sacrifice was bound up, and the knife was raised ... and the thicket shook and the voice boomed,

and Abraham's prayers were answered.

Here the sacrifices have been offered. Here the incense has been burned. Here the smoke has risen with the prayers of the children of God. Here Simeon has waited. Here Anna has prayed. The blood has been spilled, the atonements have been made, the corpses have been burned, and the smoke, rising into heaven, has been the only point of contact between a people and their God.

But things are happening. See that man there, coming from the marketplace, having traded half of the year's barley crop for a stubborn young donkey?

Years from now that man's son will question two young men whom he takes to be thieves trying to pilfer the great-great-grandchild of that burro. “The Master has need of it,” he will be told. An hour later he will be trying to give a logical explanation to his angry wife. But by then the young colt will be bearing another sacrifice over these stones ... to his death. And in that death the kingdom of death itself will be toppled, and a new Kingdom shall rise.

But for now, at this significant juncture in God's great journey toward the world's salvation, God's people wait. Out in the court of women, Anna prays. Near her, a young boy, together with his sisters Mary and Martha—Martha so gently mothering them—waits for his father to return with their dinner. Closer to the sanctuary, in the court of the men, old Simeon dons his prayer shawl and looks to heaven with hopeful eyes.

And look! Look there, for this is what we came to see—an old priest, heart heavy with the prayers of his people and his own prayers as well, turns to enter the holy place and burn his incense, as he has so many times before,

little knowing that hovering behind the curtain an angel waits, with news that will silence his tongue, and lighten his heart, and answer his prayers.

It is beginning!

We stand in a valley—the valley named Advent.

To one side the mountain called Christmas slopes back away from us—its temple and cities and trappings, remnants from an ancient time, are now dark in the evening shadows.

And ahead of us, to the east, illumined by the amber light of the morning sun, our chosen path leads to the gates of ...

Jerusalem.

And the thicket shakes ... and the Lamb emerges, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world ... and the voice booms ... and our prayers are answered.

LIGHT!

In these dark streets it now begins to shine.