

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

Palm and Marathon Sunday, April 14, 2019 (See Sept 13, 2009) on the Sunday before the 123rd Boston Marathon

The City, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister based on Matthew 21.1-10

The Bible begins in a garden but it culminates in a city. The Book of Genesis opens into a garden. Eden is beautiful and bountiful. Enormous banana leaves as large as elephants' ears. Passion flowers in electric blue. Great yellow trumpet flowers. Dahlias, as large as dinner plates, in shimmering hues of peach and lilac, apricot and tangerine.

The Bible opens into a splendid, riotous, perfect garden of God's own planting. You could be forgiven, therefore, if you supposed that the destiny of humanity might entail a return to a garden paradise: something like the Elysian fields of the Greeks, or the green pastures of Psalm 23, or a Garden of Eden reprised.

Instead, in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, the final scene of the final chapter, the denouement, opens into a city: an immense, gleaming, teeming urban metropolis, "the holy city, the new Jerusalem." A city, moreover, that is large enough, roomy enough, generous enough to accommodate whole nations and peoples.

The Bible begins in a garden but it culminates in a city.

The life of Jesus follows a like trajectory. He was born in Bethlehem—a relative garden 2000 years ago. And, yet, his entire three-year ministry is one long, twisting, winding, determined pilgrimage moving inexorably toward the city, toward Jerusalem.

Today, Palm Sunday, is the day Jesus finally arrives. Today is the day he enters the city toward which he has so long been heading; the city that is for Jesus both destination and destiny.

It is in the city – not out in some remote countryside; not in a rustic, unpopulated expanse; not in a friendly village or small town – that Jesus stages a little street theatre. He will mount a donkey, his feet reaching to the ground. His followers, lining the road, wave palm branches and spread cloaks. The crowds shout and proclaim: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God."

And with this act – this theatrical entry into the city; into the seat of power – Jesus declares to Rome and Caesar, to the powers and principalities of this world, to the mighty Empire and to the mighty Caesar that there is another power, a greater and higher power than theirs. Indeed, there is a sublime power that deserves and commands our allegiance. Palm Sunday is the day and Jerusalem is the place that Jesus and his followers declare their allegiance, not to the state—not to any human potentate – but to God.

Jesus chooses carefully, craftily, the timing of this declaration. He chooses Passover, a holiday. The city is swollen with visitors hailing from all over the world. Every room is rented. Every lane is jammed. Every bazaar swarms with pilgrims. It's as if the whole exotic world has come to Jerusalem. The atmosphere sizzles and pulses.

Palm Sunday is the day, and the city is the place that the followers of Jesus shout in public that they belong to God and not to Caesar; which, in their case, is nothing less than an act of sedition.

This is the day and this is the place, that Jesus and his followers announce and proclaim that they do homage, not to the Pax Romana (an uneasy peace achieved and held by coercive force) but to Pax Christi, a peace to which we are invited, but never coerced, a peace which emanates from the very heart of God.

That's not all. After Jesus' death, it is in the city that his followers gather. They are in the city when the Spirit comes upon them. It is, in fact, in the city that the Christian church is born on the day of Pentecost. The most telling expression of that urban birth? The moment that men and women, hailing from different nations and speaking different languages, understand each other, comprehend each other.

Maybe that is God's best dream for us: that in coming together – in a city like this, on a holiday like this – in finding ourselves in close proximity to stranger and alien, we have a better chance of understanding each other. Amen?

This biblical trajectory, this trajectory from garden to city, has me wondering. It has me wondering about a God who calls and lures, woos and entices us into cities; a God who cajoles us into cities for more than the museums and theatre, for more than the art and architecture, the restaurants and the shopping, for more than a little competition, a little road race. There's something more going on.

Maybe God calls us into cities and cajoles us together to show off the splendid, riotous diversity of the human family, a splendid diversity of God's own creating. Maybe God calls us together – into cities like this city– that we might enjoy the sound of different tongues, and delight in the variety of human hues. Maybe God calls us together just to watch us getting along for once; just to watch us delight in each other's good company.

Maybe. I don't know.

Here is what I do know. Despite the appeal to the imagination of bucolic settings conjured by Elysian fields, green pastures, or a garden paradise regained, Christian faith claims that we realize our destiny not in isolation but in interdependence, not in solitude but in community, not in homogeneity but in variety, not in tribalism but in multi-culturalism, not in bucolic retreat but in civic engagement, not in solo endeavor but in symphonic and symbiotic expression; and not, finally, in a garden but in the city.

It is not lost on me—and likely not on you—that the Boston Marathon shares a similar trajectory. It begins in a relative garden, in Hopkinton, and winds and wends its way, over hill and dale, until it concludes, until its denouement in the streets of this city.

And so I wonder, and so I hope, that what we are doing here this weekend makes glad the heart of God. For, just look at you! Look how beautiful you are. You hail from across the wide

expanse of God's beautiful earth. You embody the splendid, riotous diversity of the human family...a diversity of God's own creating.

Some of us are here to run. Amen? Some are here to cheer. Amen? Some of us are just stupefied at the prospect of anyone running for 26.2 miles. Amen? Whether athlete, cheerleader, or stupefied, there is something we all can do in this city on this holiday weekend. There is something we can do from this moment and until you all return home. We can practice being together. We can practice embodying together the splendid, riotous, diversity of the human family.

If we can manage that on this Palm Sunday, in this city on this weekend, we will have accomplished something quite special: we will have made glad the heart of God.

Amen?