

Sunday theme: Listen to the Lord.

Genesis 18:1-14 →
*Sarah laughs at the Word
of the Lord.*

Psalm 122
Listen to the Word: joyful worship

← Luke 10:38-42
*Mary does the one
thing needful.*

Read the Psalm and listen for the joy and excitement of God's people going to worship in Jerusalem. Note too, the title of the Psalm, A Song of Ascents, literally "the going up." This title will be explained in the sermon. The delivery for this sermon was different – almost conversational. The joy of the Psalm is on the left and examples of how we miss that joy are on the right.

Picture it! Hundreds and thousands of God's people heading for Jerusalem to celebrate one of the three festivals God commanded his people to observe. Families and neighbors are coming from Galilee in the north, the Trans-Jordan in the east and the areas surrounding Jerusalem. And no matter what the direction, they were going up to the holy city – up because it was built on a hill; up because this was the place where God would meet with his people and so they sang a series of 15 psalms as they traveled up to Jerusalem. And when they got to the third of these Songs of Ascent, they would sing: "I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."

"Kids, hurry up – we're going to be late for church. But mom, I haven't even showered yet. Honey, let me finish the paper. This is the only morning where I don't have to rush off to work and it's OK if we're a little late."

Here is the scene, families and towns and all the tribes of Israel streaming toward the holy city of Jerusalem. Later in their history they would come from Egypt and stream home from Babylon, and from Rome and Cyprus and Crete – the tribes of Israel all making their way to enter into the city of Jerusalem. That city, for them, was beautiful, with its fortified walls and towers high up on the hill – everything being closely built together. But it wasn't just the buildings that were close together, God's people were close and unified and one under God and so they sang: "I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."

"Dad, thanks for the vacation. Are we going to go to church on Monday since we missed church two weeks in a row?"

"We'll see – I got a lot of catching up to do on things around the house."

As those crowds of people made their way over the last hill – there it was, Jerusalem, rising 2,000 feet above the Kidron Valley floor. The sight of it must have given them goosebumps and joy. They finally

reached their destination. And even more importantly, they now could see the temple rising up above the city, the temple of God, the symbol of God's presence, the center of their worship. And this is Solomon's temple, gloriously built, counted as one of the ancient wonder of the world. Here is where they could worship their God. And so they sing: "I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."

"Pastor, could you put the Service Teams ministry on our agenda again – no one is signing up to help out and how are we going to pay all our bills. I wish others would step up a bit more."

Now the people are inside the gates, the gates of the city of David. Here is where David's throne is seated. Here is where his descendants would rule for the benefit of God's people – passing down judgments and decisions that would bless them. Here is a symbol of safety and security and peace and prosperity for all who worship God. On top of that it is here that God made a promise – a promise of a king, one of David's descendants who would for all eternity – the Messiah, the promised Savior. And so they sang: "I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."

"Abraham, you have to be kidding me. I don't care who he is, there is no way you and I are having any kids. Who would make a promise like that when it is just so impossible to believe."

Now the people are inside the gates, but they don't stop there. The crowds push their way toward the temple courts where some no doubt fell on their hands and knees and kissed the marble floor of God's house. Prayers were offered, "Shalom, peace, to Jerusalem," they cried. And if they were paying attention, if they weren't distracted by everything around them, they would see the priests making their way into the inner courts of the temple. Tradition says there were 15 steps leading up, and tradition says those priests would sing one of the songs of ascent on each of those steps. And so on the third step, the people would hear, "I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."

"Jesus, I'm trying to get things just right – the cooking, the cleaning – the rest of the company is coming over soon and Mary just sits there."

These were festival days for the people of God and their worship life would center around the sacrifices that needed to be made on their behalf. They would watch the priest sprinkle blood near the people, wipe that blood on the back of a goat and lead it far away into the wilderness, as far as the east is from the west. Then the priest would enter where only the high priest could go for who could ever stand in God's holy presence. And the people waited quietly until the priest came out again – with a smile on his face. Then they knew: once again their sins were forgiven. Once again God claimed them as His people. And again they would sing: "I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."

"Pastor's message is the same every week – sin and forgiveness; sin and forgiveness. Why can't he talk about more important things?"

No wonder David encourages his people to sing for peace for this city. And if you think of it, no other city in the world has had that prayer offered more often: Shalom, peace be with you. The city's name itself means city of peace – Jeru-shalom. But this city of peace has not had much peace. Could David have even imagined how his own grandson would divide the kingdom and no longer would people from the north be allowed to travel to Jerusalem to worship God. Generations later would be carried off into captivity, separated from the house of God. But that's Jerusalem's entire history – Assyrians and Babylonians and later Persians and then the Greeks and Romans would all conquer and take over this city of so-called peace. Later in history, the Turks, then the Crusaders, then the Muslims and then the Jews would fight to make it their own – this city of so-called peace. But that's what happens when you reject God and his promises and his will and his way.

And if that isn't enough, listen to the description of Jesus' last ride toward Jerusalem: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. 43 The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. 44 They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.'" (Luke 19:41-44) But that's what happens when you reject God and his promises and his will and his way and his word. And when we realize that the singing stops.

"But by the grace of God – that could be me."

But then I remember why Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. It wasn't just to celebrate the Passover in God's holy city, but to become our Passover lamb, the one who takes away the sin of the world. And there just outside the city he did that – with his death on the cross and then rising from the dead, with a smile on his face, we know again that our great high priest has won forgiveness and life for us – and we sing: "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'"

"By the grace of God – that's for me.

I am forgiven. I am God's child. I belong to Him!

This peace is ours and we pray for peace in God's church here on earth – but then we remember the new Jerusalem – for that is what the Bible calls it – the city of God to which we will all go up and sing inside its pearly gates and its perfect streets – the city called

heaven where God himself is present and we will sing:
“I rejoiced with those who said to me, “Let us go to the
house of the Lord.”

VVV – Phillip Sievert