

In 2012, I was fortunate enough to follow in the path of the pilgrims of our faith. It was the Friday after New Year's; five o'clock in the evening; Shabbat Shalom. I put one foot in front of the other, and my dusty Brooks running shoes carried me inside the gates to the courtyard of the Western Wall in Jerusalem. I looked up at the massive foundation stones, each one more than six feet tall, and over two thousand years old, and I was filled with an overwhelming sense of home and connection. I was standing in the very spot that is the subject of so many Psalms, and a place where Jesus, and the disciples, and so many others worshiped our Creator. It's surreal to stand in a place you've only been able to imagine in ancient texts, or old photographs, or through the first-hand accounts of others.

And one of the passages that raced through my mind was:

I was glad when they said to unto me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord!"
Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem. (Psalm 122:1-2)

This is a pilgrimage song. Travelers would sing this as they made their way to the yearly festivals. And it captures, I think, the elation of coming home, after anticipating the arrival for SO long. We are standing in the presence of God amid God's beloved!!!

Up until March of 2020, I would have never believed that any experience beyond my first Shabbat Shalom in Jerusalem could have captured Psalm 122 so succinctly, or that anything could better illustrate standing in God's presence, in the middle of a sea of fellow pilgrims, and experiencing the palpitations of the Spirit.

And then COVID-19 happened. And for more than sixty-nine weeks, our feet, whatever they were clad in, could no longer physically stand within the gates of our own little Jerusalem. We've been circling the runway for landing; we have seen the dome on the horizon for weeks; the day has been on our calendar for over a month, but still our feet have not stood on such holy ground in the company of fellow pilgrims. But today, Sardis, today, we once again stand on holy ground, in the company of our beloved neighbors and faith travelers, in the absolute presence of the One we follow.

And I am glad, and I will forever be glad, that we have come into the house of the Lord; our feet are standing in the meetinghouse, our tambourines and shakers are handy, we're gonna sing our halle, halle, halles, and we're gonna hug necks (or whatever the safe and appropriate equivalent is!), and we're gonna give thanks for the breath in our lungs, and the familiarity of this cozy space, and for the beauty of the people, and each one of their remarkable gifts that fill it. We are home, we are home, we are home, WE ARE HOME!!! Thanks be to God!!!

So...I don't want to say much more. And I don't want to exegete any more of my text today. I think our presence together, and our greeting of one another is the most sacred and appropriate thing we can do today. But I do need you to hear something before we go on about business as usual.

This has been a ridiculously hard, unfair, unimaginable year and a half. We've lost too many lives. We've lost too much time, too many resources, too much momentum, too many ideas, too many moments with friends and loved ones. And the trauma of pandemic has only exacerbated many of the weighty issues of injustice we struggled to

address in more stable times. There are many things in the coming months that we are going to have to grieve and heal from. And I know that's overwhelming.

But today, we need to celebrate a truth: Sardis Baptist Church has survived the worst parts of a once-in-a-century pandemic. No, we are not unscathed; no, we will not be unchanged; no, we cannot and we will not avoid significant challenges as we navigate our path into a new way of being, and doing, and living church.

But we have breath in our lungs; and swagger in our spirit; and the audacity of hope. For thirty-three years, Sardis has committed itself to being present. We have worshiped, every week, without fail, with authenticity and determination, no matter what. We've been intentional about staying in relationship and connection with one another. We've determined to be a place of space and rest for others – that is to say, we have resolved to be here, to be doing our thing, to letting everyone know that they can count on our consistency. And community members have been invited to be recipients of that consistent love and space, even in, especially in the times where they don't have the bandwidth to be as present as they want to be. Sardis has been here. Sardis is here. And Sardis is gonna keep on being here.

So...look down at your feet. Wiggle your toes. They're standing on holy ground.

And look around at one another. Smile. You have been ascending to this temple for more than a year, and I don't care what anyone says, virtual travel is much more taxing, and much more demanding than physical travel! Find rest and strength in one another.

Holy Ground
Bob Stillerman
Seventh Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 9, 7/11/2021
Psalm 122



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

And look out that big worship window, with its sun, and shade, and sky, and blue and green, and life. It's simply better in 3-D, isn't it?

Friends, God's love and God's presence are here with us. Let's grab a hold of them, together. And now that our feet reside once more in Jerusalem, let's set about bringing peace and justice back into a volatile world.

May it be so, and may it be soon!