Sermons at Christ Church

Be One Body In Christ, belonging To Each Other.

Christmas II
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

How dear to me is your dwelling place. Says the psalmist. My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God. The psalmist shares his deepest affection for the temple and expresses his deepest desire to be in that temple-the only place that held such an important value for ever every Jew, the one place where they could connect with what was missing in their lives, the one place where every pilgrim can come for fulfillment and affirmation, the one place where even the sparrow can find a home and the swallow, a nest. For the psalmist, the only way that he can respond to the God of his salvation who dwells in the temple, was to express this deep joy and praise. Marianne Meye Thompson writes that "Joy, or rejoicing, is the proper response to, and occasioned by, God's saving activity." The only way we know how to respond to our salvation is through joy and praise to our God.

Psalm 84 is a pilgrim psalm which was sung as praise by pilgrims who traveled over long distances to Jerusalem. The desire of every Jew was to visit Jerusalem to worship at the temple-that was the dwelling place of God. More importantly, that was where they got their lives in order. Because of this desire, the challenge of traveling to Jerusalem over sea, desert, wilderness and dangerous places was not enough to quench that burning desire to visit the temple. The journey itself spoke more about their desire.

Mary and Joseph, like any Jew, took a similar journey to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. The Passover is the celebration of the exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Bear in mind that pilgrims do not travel individually, for their own safety, they travel in groups. And so it wasn't strange for Mary and Joseph to have assumed that Jesus was with another group.

But after traveling for a day, they began to look for him because they didn't see him. And when they did not find him among fellow pilgrims, they returned back to Jerusalem to look for him.

I can only imagine the anguish that Mary and Joseph felt when they realized that Jesus was not part of the families traveling together. They must have felt betrayed by the community with whom they traveled. Where is he? What happened to him? They returned to Jerusalem to look for their son, like every parent would. After searching for three days, they eventually found him at the temple of all places.

He wasn't only in the temple, but was sitting among teachers, listening and asking questions. The gift of knowledge doesn't come with only listening, but it comes with asking questions. To grow in your knowledge of God, we have to ask questions. Remember Mary asking the angel *"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"*

It is important to remember that not every question may have an answer, but questions are like pointers-they lead us to the right path, they help us to properly evaluate a situation, they help us to gain a better understanding, they help affirm our place within a relationship, an organization or a community. And answers to our questions, creates a sense of belonging. It affirms for us that someone actually cares about us and our concerns.

Mary upon seeing Jesus, runs towards him. What a huge sigh of relief it must have been for her and Joseph. And in a loving motherly way, yet in an exasperated voice, reproaches the son who nearly broke their hearts and tells him what he's put them through. But Jesus wasn't focused on their anguish. Why are you searching for me? He asked. Mind you, this is a twelve-year-old boy. Does he remind you of any 12 year old boy you know? He would have been in sixth grade. But he is asking a question as if his parents didn't owe him any duty of care.

I think the point that Jesus seems to be making is that you search for one who is lost. "Not all who wander are lost." Says J.R.R. Tolkein. He may have wandered off but he wasn't lost. And because he wasn't lost, you shouldn't be searching for him. How can he be lost in his Father's house? How can I be lost when I am about my Father's business?

How can you look for me when I am in the temple-the one place where everyone desires to be? Luke wasn't trying to make Joseph and Mary feel bad about their parenting skills, but this was an attempt for Luke to have Jesus lay claim to his own understanding of himself and especially his purpose on earth. If you know your purpose, you can tell what is missing in your life. If you are in tune with yourself, your purpose on earth becomes even clearer, you can see your path, and so long as you stay on that path, you cannot be lost. You may wander, but you cannot be lost. Others may come looking for you, but it wouldn't be because you are lost.

I want to share a story of a lady I met while she sat by the dying bed of her father-in-law. She had never met him. She knew that he lived in a dilapidated building not too far from where she lived with her husband and children. Her husband hadn't seen the father in over thirty years when he walked away with his brother because of abuse. But this man stayed in that run-down house, sat cross-legged at the same spot for over thirty years. People who knew he was in that house will drop food by his door. He will crawl to pick the food and crawl back to the same spot. The man's two sons didn't want to have anything to do with him. But the daughter-in-law knew that something was missing in the man's life, she sensed this great responsibility to offer this man something more than he had ever known. She went to the run-down house, pulled the man out of the house, brought him home, gave him a long bath with water hose and provided him a place of comfort. When she told me the story, I asked if she is a member of any church. She doesn't go to church. But she knew she had to look for the father-in-law, she knew she could love him and provide dignity and worth for him, she knew the man was lost, and she like Mary and Joseph, had to bring him home.

On this first Sunday of the year, the question is, who may be looking for you? Who thinks that you are lost because you do not know what your purpose is? Or who may be missing in your life? I need you to take a hard look at yourself and ask yourself some deep and invasive questions about your zest for life and your walk with God. Has it been life transforming? What changes do you see in your life?

I do not know the path on which you find yourself but I have some good news for you-it is one of knowing your worth as a child of God and God's holy temple. It is one of knowing the hope to which you have been called-the kind of hope which sustains in times of sorrow, sadness or any difficulty, like this pandemic. The good news is one of knowing the riches of God's glorious inheritance-that because of your salvation and mine, because of God's love, God took on human flesh, to be born as a baby and to glorify the human being as holy and dignified. The good news is one of knowing the immeasurable greatness of God's power for those who believe-that we possess the gift of finding the missing pieces in our lives and that of others, and to turn mourning into dancing, sorrow into joy, despair into purposefulness, hopelessness into hopefulness, emptiness into fulfillment and powerlessness into empowerment for good. We have been blessed with grace that we do not have to literally walk to Jerusalem to experience the presence of God, we can feel God's presence within us and each other, and so we can express the same deep affection we have for the temple to each other.

Again, I do not know the path on which you find yourself this morning-but is Jesus on the same path with you? Is Jesus missing in your life? When was the last time you connected with him? What holy desire drives you to seek God, to find the missing pieces in your life and to get your life in order? Today presents a unique opportunity for you to look for Jesus in your life, to symbolically return to Jerusalem, to eagerly search for him and reconnect with him.

And when you reconnect with him, you will come to find out that your purpose and his are one- it is about our passion for God's new holy temple-you and everyone, it is about our deepest affection for each other. Happy New Year. Amen.