

WPC AND THE PRESENT

Psalm 48

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 9, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

¹ *Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God.*

*His holy mountain, ²beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
the city of the great King.*

³ *Within its citadels God
has shown himself a sure defence.*

⁴ *Then the kings assembled,
they came on together.*

⁵ *As soon as they saw it, they were astounded;
they were in panic, they took to flight;*

⁶ *trembling took hold of them there,
pains as of a woman in labour,*

⁷ *as when an east wind shatters
the ships of Tarshish.*

⁸ *As we have heard, so have we seen
in the city of the Lord of hosts,
in the city of our God,
which God establishes for ever.*

⁹ *We ponder your steadfast love, O God,
in the midst of your temple.*

¹⁰ *Your name, O God, like your praise,
reaches to the ends of the earth.*

Your right hand is filled with victory.

¹¹ *Let Mount Zion be glad,
let the towns of Judah rejoice
because of your judgements.*

¹² *Walk about Zion, go all around it,
count its towers,*

¹³ *consider well its ramparts;
go through its citadels,
that you may tell the next generation*

¹⁴ *that this is God,
our God for ever and ever.
He will be our guide for ever.*

As we have returned from COVID this fall, I am grateful to the congregation for the depth and enthusiasm of our return. As you so often do, you have exceeded my expectations. It is inspiring and instructive that you have.

As we have come home to Westminster this fall, I have wanted us to stretch our muscles, like baseball players in spring training, which about half of them are now anticipating if their team did not make the playoffs. So I have preached on both halves of what Jesus calls “The Greatest Commandment”: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In the next three sermons, I want to speak about us as a congregation: “WPC and the Present,” “WPC and the Future,” and “WPC and Commitment.” If the first two sermons were about individuals stretching our muscles in spring training, these next three are about WPC coming together as a team now that the season has re-opened after COVID.

Let us pray: *Lord, may what I say and what we do be consistent with your word and will for us, and may we say and do it joyfully. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

I.

While writing this sermon, I received an email from another Presbyterian minister that read in part:

Westminster seems, as I view it, the most healthy [of churches I know] ...Just my outside sense. Not that there aren't many other healthy congregations. But I'm interested in your sense of what has been so successful. I'm guessing the Spirit at work through some [combination] of stable, strong leadership ...and perhaps a healthy community over the years going in, with resources and both a [neighborhood] that is church focused still and perhaps growing with young families?

I share this with you not as a means of expressing pride but encouragement. The person who wrote this email, observing us from a distance, has sized up much of what makes this congregation so fortunate.

- *The Spirit at work*: YES. We are not just a community organization. We are not just a social club. We are not just a place for family activities. We are not just a place for the exchange of ideas among people who have the leisure and inclination to do so. There is a tangible, discernible presence of the Spirit of God in our midst. *The Spirit at work. YES.*
- *Stable, strong, leadership*: YES. Early in my ministry at Westminster, I began to tell colleagues in other parts of the country, “I have never been around such an intelligent and committed group of laypeople as I have found at WPC and in the DC area.” For most of its 70 years, Westminster has had a strong, professional, and caring staff that work together, serve together, and laugh together. *Stable, strong leadership: lay and clergy, officers and staff. YES.*
- *A healthy community over the years*: YES – When I began serving Westminster this same week in 2004, I said to myself, “I didn't know they still made churches like this.” Even though the congregation had passed through a rough patch, the Interim Pastor Roger Shoup said to me when I began, “My job [Roger's job] was just to reassure the congregation that they were healthy.” *A healthy community over the years. YES.*

- *A part of town that is church focused still: LARGELY TRUE.* Even as the portion of the American population that describes itself as religious, believing in God, or Christian continues to decline, within the bounds of our city are two churches of our denomination large enough to have a full program, at least three Episcopal Churches, a strong Presbyterian Church of another denomination, a strong Baptist Church, and a new Anglican Church in the neighborhood. These congregations differ widely in their theology and in much of their understanding of the Christian faith, but most offer strong programming for many ages and give our most immediate neighbors several theologically significant choices for finding a spiritual home.
- *And still perhaps growing with young families. YES.* Though our church is by no means limited to people with children, in addition to our 1055 members, we have over 300 children and youth who are pre-confirmation age. It appears that we have about as many children and youth as the congregation may ever have had. *Still growing with young families.*

II.

When I was in high school, our minister attended the General Assembly of our denomination and then preached a sermon giving an assessment of the state of the larger church. He entitled the sermon “Walking Around Zion,” based on a line in Psalm 48, in which the psalmist is literally walking around Jerusalem (Zion), assessing and celebrating the state of the holy city. The beauty of the psalmist’s words describes the beauty of the *feelings* I have for WPC in the present as well as my *assessment* concerning how we have held up during COVID and why we are coming back so well in its aftermath. So for the remainder of the sermon, let me paraphrase the psalm:

*Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised
In the city of our God.*

As wonderful as we think and feel our congregation is, what is great about it is what God has done through it. What is great is the sheer gratitude, humility, praise that we can offer God: In our service, in our learning, in our life together, and in our prayers, preaching, professing, proclaiming and offering hymns and anthems and instrumental music to God.

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised...

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*God’s holy mountain,
Beautiful in elevation,
Is the joy of all the earth,*

Being here Sunday after Sunday, during those long fall and winter months of 2020 and 2021, when no one but Alex and Vince and Jim and those of us leading worship were in the sanctuary, and then when one by one over many months you would return, tentatively, unrecognizable in masks and untouchable by the standards we all sought to follow, it has been moving to see the way so many of you were moved the first time you came to the Sanctuary or the first time you came back and found people gathered. One person not involved in the music program said: “I was moved to tears when I heard the organ.” I still get misty-eyed up here when I see someone for the first time or just see so many children in the chancel or people of all ages in the choir loft. I realize in the months between when the balcony used to be filled and has now begun to fill again, I have lost the ability to identify the faces in that loft space, but I can still make out the forms, and it is great to see people up there. *It is the joy of all the earth* to be here.

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*Within its citadels God
Has shown himself a sure defence.*

We have been protected during COVID. As a congregation we have been defended against what is one of the most devastating challenges to the already weakened presence of Christianity in our country. So many churches will have to close because of COVID. So many people will have drifted from the faith. But I have felt that within this congregation, this *citadel*, *God has show himself a sure defence*.

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*Then the kings assembled,
They came on together.
As soon as they saw [the holy mountain], they were astounded;
They were in panic, they took to flight...*

With the cruelty, anger, hatred, self-righteousness, moral and ideological certainty and intensity within our nation, with the cruel form that so much of Christianity now takes in our country and the media coverage of that cruelty, when people come to Westminster – whether they are royalty or mere citizens seeking a spiritual home, when they see the way we use language, the way we speak to one another civilly and respectfully, the way we disagree with one another in an atmosphere of mutual exchange rather than mutual recrimination, the way we care for one another with both truthfulness and compassion, any among those who are invested in the conflict and divisiveness of our national discourse will have reason to tremble, to take flight, to panic... for we continue to show how to be human and respectful to one another through whatever differences we have on social or cultural or political or theological differences that exist within our church and culture.

*Then the kings assembled,
They came on together.
As soon as they saw [the way we conduct ourselves],
They were astounded...*

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*We ponder your steadfast love, O God,
In the midst of your temple.*

I hope everything we say and do “in the midst of this temple” called Westminster speaks of God’s steadfast love, God’s constancy, God’s mercy.

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*Your name, O God, like your praise,
Reaches to the ends of the earth.*

God’s name does reach to the ends of the earth through all we seek to do around the world quietly in the name of Christ. God’s name reaches to the ends of the earth in the way each of us in this room represents Christ: when we go to our places of work downtown or in our basements; in our classrooms whether we be teachers or students; in the boards and committees and volunteer agencies in which we serve; in Ukraine or Iraq or Germany or Korea or the Pentagon in which we are stationed. God’s name reaches to the ends of the earth as we each bear it – respectfully, with dignity, as individuals.

And God's name reaches to the ends of the earth through our physical presence and financial support at the Spirit Lake Reservation in North Dakota, the United Orphanage and Academy in Moi's Bridge, Kenya, through apple gleanings and home rebuilding and restoration work through the Appalachian Service Project, through sheltering people and delivering furniture or meals in Alexandria. *Your name, O God, like your praise, reaches to the ends of the earth.*

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Thus, my friends:

*Walk about Westminster,
Go all around it,
Count its towers,
Its steeples,
Its courtyard and playground,
Its classrooms and youth lounge and scout rooms,
Its craft room and parlor,
Its chapel and sanctuary,
Its balcony and choir loft,
Consider well its ramparts
Go through its citadels,
That we may tell the next generation
In Beverly Hills and Del Ray,
In Mt. Vernon and Annandale,
In Seminary Valley and Old Town,
In Middleburg, Lorton, and Vienna,
On Capitol Hill,
In Annandale, Arlington, and McLean,
At Ft. Belvoir and Boling and Andrews,
That this is God,
Our God for ever and ever,
That God will be our guide for ever.*

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised...