

Psalm 125

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Before he retired, my father was an astronomer for the University of Texas. Every summer our family would take our pilgrimage to the McDonald Observatory on the peak of Mount Locke in the Davis Mountains of West Texas. Because of its stunning views, every guesthouse there had at least one picture window.

One of my jobs was to take the key to the observatory building on the crest of the mountain and go get our family's mail. It would take hours. There was a coke machine perched on the edge of the mountain next to the maintenance shed that needed to be visited, and sidewalks running all around that had to be explored, and deer that had to be greeted. There was a pool table above the mailroom, and next to it a large wooden chest of dry ice that would let off steamy clouds if you lifted the lid, which you could do if the astronomers weren't watching. There was a manual typewriter in the library that contained all the letters of the alphabet, upper case and lower, in a row of steel keys, and beneath these keys hundreds of stories and novels and plays just waiting to be tapped out onto the backs of old observation notes. There were tourists hanging around the entrance to persecute with juvenile authority: "I'm sorry, authorized personnel only. I have official business in here, *you'll* have to wait for the tour." And above all else, there was the vista that surrounded us on every side, that I had to examine and reexamine every day, standing by the edge of the road, key in one hand, ten-ounce Coke bottle in the other, looking across the valley at mountains on the opposite rim of the world. No matter what

was going on, the mountains seemed to symbolize the vast possibilities—freedom, creativity, exploration, and wonder.

I didn't know how deeply those mountains had planted themselves in my memory till I returned as an adult. The coke machine was long gone. The deer were fewer, the people more numerous. The manual typewriter with its wondrous potentials was nowhere in sight. But when I stood in the place where I used to stand, it was as if I still had the key in one hand and the ten-oz. Coke in the other, because the mountains I saw on the far rim of the world, and the mountains hidden deep in memory converged, like two halves of a broken locket, like the view from two eyes coming into focus. The furniture of Mount Locke had changed, I had changed, but the rocky outline against the sky had not moved at all. Until I actually visited Jerusalem, this reliable vista was what I envisioned every time I read the 125th Psalm. Listen for the word of God in the words of Psalm 125...

¹ Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

² As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds the people,
from this time on and forevermore.

³ For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous,
so that the righteous might not stretch out their hands to do wrong.

⁴ Do good, O Holy One, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts.

⁵ But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways
God will lead away with evildoers. Peace be upon Israel!

The claim in Psalm 125 that those who trust in God are like Mount Zion *seems* so clear and simple. People are vulnerable, we can be moved, we can stumble and slip, but just look up at the majestic mountain of the temple, that eternal, fixed place where God and humans meet, and you will see the divine sign here on earth of how rock solid things really are.

This 125th Psalm is the sixth of fifteen short songs thought to be pilgrimage psalms used by families as they made their way up to Jerusalem during the time of the second temple. These psalms vibrate with the synergy between the faith of the pilgrims and the fortunes of the city they praise. What they say about Jerusalem they also say for themselves, things like: "Peace be upon Jerusalem; the one keeping Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion." Throughout these psalms, Jerusalem, that is Zion, is the dearly loved mediator between worshippers and God.

At the same time these psalmists make it plain that what they long to see is not yet clear. "Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace," the psalmists say. "Turn again our captivity." Psalm 125 expresses the hope that, as it says "The scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land," that God will do good to those that are good, and will lead the crooked people away from them. The psalms voiced encouragements for those waiting for something new and different in the future: "In God's word I hope; my soul waits more than those who watch for the morning. Peace be within your walls." Jerusalem's glorious future seems just around the corner, almost accessible. After all, there is Mount Zion, right there, standing as immovable evidence of God's trustworthiness.

But as you discover the first time you visit Jerusalem, expecting to see those things that abide forever—the ironic thing is that, contrary to this psalm, ancient places can and do keep changing. In fact, not only *can* Mount Zion be moved, but it *has* moved. Twice. Once before this psalm was written, and once after. If Mount Zion was supposed to signal reliability, steadfastness, fixedness, an anchor in the midst of a tumultuous

world, it hasn't served exactly as the psalmist envisioned. But even so, and perhaps all the more, Mount Zion's story is the story of the faithful in the real world.

On the back of your bulletin you'll find a little visual aid to help you trace this story about moveable mountains. If you had visited Jerusalem at the time of King David, and had asked directions to Mount Zion, you would have heard that it is exactly where you were standing—it was the steep spiny outcrop that David captured from the Jebusites, a place that was already called the stronghold of Zion long before David came and made it his city, the City of David. Zion was a town, like Zanesville, and you were there.

But if you had returned to Jerusalem a few generations later and looked for Mount Zion, you would have been pointed north, to a higher hilltop that had been outside the city limits, the place where David's son Solomon built the Temple and his palace. When Solomon moved the resting place of God from the tabernacle in downtown Zion out to the northern suburbs, it wasn't long before the name Zion followed. The mountain of the Israelite temple became the new Mount Zion. And like many downtowns today, the original city, old Zion, fell to neglect. It became the poor side of town, and eventually the city wall no longer enclosed it. For almost three thousand years it was forgotten that *that* was the first, the original Zion.

So Mount Zion moved, and when the psalmists wrote, "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which can never be moved," this was the mountain they referred to—Mount Zion number 2, the temple mount, which they thought would remain forever. Times changed, though. Solomon's temple was destroyed by Babylon. It was rebuilt by Persia, then desecrated by the Greeks, recaptured by the Maccabees, and

renovated by King Herod in the days of Jesus. Through all these changes on its surface, Mount Zion held steady underneath. The longer it was the mountain of the temple, the more it became a synonym for the holiest place where God and humanity met, the doorway between earth and heaven, not just a place on the map but a place in the heart. This was the Mount Zion I expected to find in Jerusalem, the biblical Mount Zion.

But times change. A generation after Jesus, in 70 C.E., Herod's temple was destroyed by the Romans, and it hasn't been there since. Since there was no mistaking where the temple used to be, you would think that it would still be called Mount Zion. But oddly, if you had returned to look for Mount Zion at the end of the first century, you would have been directed not to the first Mount Zion, nor to the place where the temple lay in ruins, but to an entirely different place, a mountain west of the first one, a newer suburb. Mount Zion III.

No one knows for sure now just how this happened. Some think it was because people mistook it for the original Zion, the city of David. Some think it had to do with the very early Jewish-Christian community of James the brother of Jesus, who worshipped there in a building where Jesus celebrated the last supper with his disciples, the upper room where the church was born at Pentecost. Some say that this group left Jerusalem before the Roman invasion, but then returned when things settled down and rebuilt their Jewish-Christian synagogue-church, and perhaps even borrowed stones from the destroyed Temple as a memorial. Maybe they borrowed the name too. No one knows for sure. However it came about, by the end of the first century, people were already calling this third place, this Christian place, Mount Zion. And it remains so to this day. If you

visited Jerusalem today you would find Mount Zion not where it began, nor where the psalmist found it, but outside the walls on the southwest corner of the old city.

Ironically, it is Mount Zion's very gravity that has contributed to all these changes, and to even more through the centuries. The little Jewish-Christian place was invaded by unfriendly Gentile Christians, who built their church on Mount Zion, right next to the site of the Upper Room. Mount Zion suffered rising and falling fortune throughout the centuries as Jerusalem came into the hands of the Muslims, then the Persians, and then the Muslims again. When the crusaders from Europe captured Jerusalem in 1099 and came to the southwestern hill that was the third Mount Zion, they found the Christian churches there in ruins. So they built out of what was left an enormous new church, with an upper room on its second floor, which is still there today—incongruous though it may be, there was now a crusader upper room for Jesus.

Up to this point it was pretty much the Christians who kept Mt. Zion going. But since everyone thought this third hill was the first Mount Zion, King David's city, the legend grew that his tomb was there too. The crusaders built a kind of false sarcophagus to honor the spot, and it was only a matter of time before a Jewish pilgrim reported to have found the real tomb of David nearby. So the place became sacred to Jews as well as to Christians. Then, since Muslims honor David too, they also entered the fray. To make a long story short, the Upper Room and the Tomb of David underneath it have at different points in the last thousand years been in the possession of various Christians, then Muslims, then Christians again, then Muslims again, and now Jews. If you go today you see a sight the tourguides aren't necessarily prepared to explain. A crusader room for the Christian last supper with a Muslim prayer niche in its wall and a tomb for David

below looking very much like a casket waiting patiently for burial. The buildings kept changing, the furniture kept being rearranged, and the stories differ depending on the viewpoint of the tellers. And the definition of God's people that God surrounds as the mountains surround Jerusalem grows bigger and bigger.

In the nineteenth century, archaeologists discovered the mistake. They discovered that original Mount Zion was not this one, but the next hill over to the east where the oldest remains were found. But that hasn't changed the minds or the maps of the faithful. The new Mount Zion is good enough. In fact, as if to prove the point, when you go to Mount Zion the Third today, you can often see King David himself there, standing at the crossroads near his own tomb, wearing a gold crown, strumming a little harp, singing his own psalms, and brandishing a donation box, with a sign on it that says King David, just in case you are confused.

You get used to that sort of thing in Jerusalem. You would think the holy places were eternal but they aren't. They don't ever stand still, they are forever being forgotten and remembered and contested and destroyed and remade. The seemingly eternal symbols of God's presence, the furniture of our meeting places with the divine, which we might think would have some immunity, are earthly places after all. If you could somehow see the untouched bedrock way below the surface, the way you can see the untouched mountains of West Texas, you'd see the things that, in human terms anyway, abide forever. But you can't see it on the surface of Jerusalem. Sometimes westerners are appalled that the so-called city of peace inspires so much wrangling. But it's only a microcosm of the struggle in the wider world, where Shiites and Sunnis, Southern Baptists and Moderate Baptists, evangelicals and mainlines, Presbyterians and other

Presbyterians contend bitterly over their version of the holy. God is no more finished with Jerusalem than with the rest of us.

What I want to draw from this strange history is not just about Jerusalem but about those the psalmist says are *like* Mount Zion, that is, those who trust in God. You and me. We may equate steadfast trust with otherworldly certainty and resistance to change. But if we were able to pull that off we would be doing something that not even the most revered holy places can do. It is not just Mount Zion that never stays still. It is us as well. We grow, move, age, suffer disasters, recover, see new things we never saw before. Sometimes changes happen happily, as an opportunity is seized, like when Mount Zion moved to house the Temple of God, or like when each of us made the decision to come here. Sometimes changes happen catastrophically, as when the temple fell in a day to enemies, as when the city was flooded with conquerors. Five years ago we in the U.S. had only the dimmest imagination of such a thing—that the landscape could change in a single day by fire or flood. Now we know better.

Like the three Mount Zions, we have seen all kinds of radical changes across our surfaces. But the bedrock underneath remains, invisibly but reliably. Though our entire lives are a pilgrimage of change, still there underneath us a foundation that stays steady, a bedrock we can trust. That foundation is not of our making. It is not our wisdom nor our talent, nor even our most carefully articulated theology. Human words can neither create nor adequately describe this foundation, which is God alone. Change never ceases up on top, but underneath it are the everlasting arms of God. It is very easy to get trust in God confused with adherence to a particular version of the holy. We need our theologies as

guideposts, but they are not God. Trust is a stance of expectancy, openness to God. Not something we feel but something we live.

There is a fascinating turn to the story of Mount Zion. By the fourth century, the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians next door were alienated by their theologies. Relations were so terrible that the Jewish Christians on Mount Zion built a literal wall of separation to protect themselves. But a monk from Thessalonica named Porphyrius, a Jewish Christian, preached the Gentile and Jewish churches into reconciling with each other. Through his patient work toward a goal that must have seemed impossible, Porphyrius brought about yet another change on Mount Zion when the literal wall came down. Somehow this leader reached down into the bedrock and found the resources to create something new, not seen before. He didn't just wish for peace in Jerusalem, but prayed and imagined and spoke it into being.

When I take students to Israel I like for us to visit with the people, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, who are similarly reaching down to the bedrock of their trust in God to create reconciliation. This summer in the midst of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah I heard a remarkable word of bedrock hope. I was talking with my friend Rabbi David Ariel-Joel, who grew up in Jerusalem. He said that when he was young in the 1970s he heard a political leader saying that the dispute between Jews and Arabs was irresolvable, and the nation would simply have to learn to live forever with irreconcilable differences and the violence that resulted. That man went on to cite as examples to prove his point the following conflicts: northern Ireland, South Africa, and East and West Germany, all places where the patient work of reconciliation has brought down walls. I didn't like what he was saying at the time, Rabbi David said, but now it gives me hope.

My hope for you throughout this new year is that you will entrust yourself to God, knowing that the bedrock will remain, that there is great hope for the future even when it cannot yet be seen. The furnishings of faith, of theology, of the world as we know it, all of this can change, but God remains true. Trust that bedrock to sustain you, and you will not only abide secure, but will help pray and imagine and speak God's reconciling peace into a conflicted world.