

Isaiah 66:10-16; Psalm 66:1-9 Galatians 6: 7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

One of the things I loved about being a young mother was nursing my babies. There were many things I loved about nursing, but one of the things that was a source of absolute delight was watching my child, fully satiated, kind of flop back into my arms, eyes closed, head lolling to one side, mouth slightly open with a dribble of milk seeping out one corner. Milk drunk.

A child who just 10 minutes before had been frantically howling, at peace. At deep, deep peace. Not infrequently, this would be accompanied by a deep, deep sigh. Ahh, she seemed to be saying. This. This is what it's all about. Being full, being held, being totally, totally, relaxed in my mother's arms. This.

Isaiah picked such a perfect image to represent the moments the Jews had known of being at home with God. The Jews themselves used another image—Jerusalem, to represent to fullness of peace and joy of being at rest in God's lap. They knew full well what it was like to be away from home. In exile in Babylon, away from the temple, away from the beloved streets. Hungry, in fact, frantically hungry and scared they might never see Jerusalem again. Might never drink of God again.

Such a powerful image was Jerusalem in the life and imagination of Israel, that she stood in for the spiritual life itself. In the spiritual life, one could be at home with God. Or not. Then Jerusalem was not a mother, but a harlot, a source of shame, an unfaithful spouse to God. I am not sure how that works with the mother's milk image used today by Isaiah, but there you have it. In the spiritual life there is nurture to be had at God's breast—Jerusalem perfected. And, in the spiritual life we can fail miserably—eternally hungry. Like a harlot on the prowl.

Jerusalem, can be hard to sustain.

Paul, writing to the Galatians, knows this—how hard the spiritual Jerusalem is to sustain. He knows well how our pride and anger can undermine God's work in the world. Don't spend your time criticizing the behavior of another, he advises, when you aren't even able to look at your own behavior. For God to dwell in a community, the community needs to get their act together.

And, in today's Gospel reading from Luke, we have words from the master spiritual teacher himself, Jesus. The spiritual reality the Jews call Jerusalem, full and at rest on a mother's chest, Jesus calls the kingdom of heaven. Like Jerusalem milk drunk and at peace, the kingdom of heaven is where we are at fully at peace and satisfied. And, the kingdom of heaven is something we can briefly experience here and now on earth. Already/not yet is how the church thinks of the kingdom. Possible, briefly, in the here and now. Wonderful, thrilling, deeply peaceful, for a time. Enough to keep us going, hanging on, until it is fully known, fully present, and eternal reality, some day in the future.

Jesus sent out the 70 to spread the news of God's love and God's kingdom of love. Not just a heavenly home, not just a future reality, but a presence in people's hearts and minds and lives. A presence that could satisfy their hungers even as a mother's milk satisfies her babe. Right now.

And we are the 70. In our baptismal covenant we signed on for the responsibility of taking God's love, and the news of God's love to others. Now, as Episcopalians, we don't go door to door to do that, but we are none-the-less, all of us, called to be evangelists of sort. One's who carry the good news out into the world, so others will know that God is love, that God has a wonderful gift to give. Tastes of heaven, right now.

So in this morning's gospel Jesus has some words of wisdom for us as we head out to do that important mission. The mission of manifesting God's love in a world that sometimes howls like a starving infant.

This is such basic advice that may think we know it well. This is such valuable advice that it always bears repeating. This advice is the very essence of what it takes to be on the road to Jerusalem, or to live in the midst of the kingdom as we can know it here and now.

The first rule when you are an evangelist is this: travel light. Don't get all caught up on the what-ifs and the but-it-coulds. Let tomorrow worry about tomorrow. All you need are a clothes on your back, the sandals on your feet and a sturdy staff to steady you. In common day parlance, we might say, live simply. Limit the distractions.

The second rule is this, don't travel alone. The buddy system we used on school field trips—not a new thing. The company of others not only keeps us safe, it keeps us humble. Paul knew that.

The third, don't shop around for the best deal. If we are going from house to house, place to place, searching for the perfect conditions--the best food, the softest bed--, before we settle down to our work, we are wasting God's time. Don't move from house to house, just get to work already, Jesus advises.

The fourth—speaking of time, don't waste your time on those who don't want to learn. Not everyone gets it, not everyone wants it. We can move on. And when we do, we shouldn't let the dust of our failure cling to us. If we do let that dust cling to us, it will distract us, weigh us down. Don't obsess about the relative, or friend, or spouse who doesn't get God.

And the fifth—If others don't want to learn, it isn't our failure anyway, because it isn't about us. It never was about us. And just like it isn't about our failure when we don't work miracles, it isn't about our success when we do. What counts, in the end, what really counts, is that we have been in an intimate relationship with our God. Our names are written in the book.

Or as it is put in an even more lovely image elsewhere in scripture, our names are written on the palm of God's hand.

When Jesus talks about God desiring that we have life, and have life in abundance, this is what he is talking about. He is talking about tasting the kingdom. He is talking about the experience of living as a part of the Body of Christ, that wonderful and mystical reality we are called to embody as the Church. He is talking about coming home to Jerusalem, like a child comes to his mother's breast. He is talking about how we might come to know that our names are inscribed upon the palms of God's hands.

And perhaps most importantly of all, to have abundant life is to remember, to know, to understand that whatever the depth of our longing for God, our hunger, our desire for God, it pales, in comparison,--- to God's longing for us.

If you have ever held a milk drunk infant in your arms, gazed at them, heart full, perhaps you know what I mean.