**The Great Gates of Praise**

Sunday, November 26, 2017 Psalm 100

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

With Thanksgiving happening this past week, many of us headed over the river and through the woods to Grandma's house for the big day and an even bigger meal. Thanksgiving week is typically the most active time for travel in the United States, with airports and roads jammed with people trying to get into or out of the city. It's a time that stretches our transportation infrastructure to the brink; but a little luck and a lot of patience will allow us eventually to see the skyline or the welcome sign of our hometown. We know that a certain view, a certain exit, a certain landmark means that we're almost there.

When traveling to a major American city, the only gates one is likely to encounter are at the airport or at the tollbooth. That's a different experience from what most people would have had in the old world of Europe, Asia and the Middle East. For centuries old world cities were almost uniformly surrounded by defensive walls dotted with gates that limited access to the city and, in many ways, gave the city its character. While the walls of many of those cities are gone or are now monuments to the past, the great gates remain as a testament to the universal joy of coming home to a safe and familiar place. When you arrived at those old cities and went through the gate, it was a moment for rejoicing.

Whether they were built for defensive or ceremonial purposes, those old gates represented the difference between being outside and being inside, between security and vulnerability, between being home and being away. Consider some of these great gates and their meaning for the people who used them.

The Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany, was built by Prussian monarchs in the 18th century, but became even more famous in the 20th century as a symbol of peace when the dividing wall between East and West Germany came down. Many families who had been separated for decades were now able to have joyous reunions as a result.

The Sumgnyemun Gate (South Gate) in Seoul, South Korea was built in the 14th century as a greeting place for foreign emissaries and as a way of keeping Korean tigers from entering the city. True story!

There are plenty of places in Europe where gates remain amid the ruins of medieval defensive walls. The Amsterdamse Poort, for example, was built in 1355, and was located on the old road to Amsterdam. The famous gate was restored in the 1980s. Cities like York and Lincoln in the United Kingdom and Cologne, Germany, still retain significant sections of their medieval city walls and gates.

The Buland Darwaza or “The Gate of Magnificence” was built in 1601 in Fatehpur Sikri, India, by the Mughal Emperor Akbar to commemorate a military victory. The large, ornate gate took 12 years to build, and an inscription on its face testifies to Akbar’s religious open-mindedness. Interestingly, the inscription reads, “Isa [Jesus], son of Mary said: ‘The world is a Bridge, pass over it, but build no houses upon it. He who hopes for a day may hope for eternity; but the World endures but an hour. Spend it in prayer for the rest is unseen’.”

And then there is the Middle East. The fortified gates of Cairo still stand and the gates of the Old City of Jerusalem still remind travelers of the grandeur of the city during the various stages of the city’s history. The gates of Jerusalem still have a deep meaning for pilgrims traveling to the city from faraway places: entering the gates meant entering into the holy city and the temple, the dwelling place of God. To enter the gates of Jerusalem, then, was to enter into the very presence of God, which was cause for great songs like Psalm 100. The description of the psalm is "A Psalm of Thanksgiving," but, in this case, coming home for Thanksgiving was more than a family get-together: It was an act of praise to God.

Psalm 100 is one of the most familiar of the songs of praise in the Bible and the source of some of our most beloved songs of worship. The psalm itself is an invitation to sing: "Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing" (v. 1). A "joyful noise" was the appropriate greeting for a monarch in the ancient world, and, in this case, it is "all the earth" that cries out in joy at the presence of the Creator. It's the kind of joyful noise we might make when we enter the front door of the family home after a long absence; the excited shouts of family and friends welcoming us home at last. When entering the gates of the Lord, those excited shouts soon turn to songs of worship.

If we consider the place where we worship as our church "home," this opening couple of verses has a lot to say to us. Do we make a "joyful noise" when we come to worship, or do we settle for sighs of boredom or the sharp sound of complaint? Do we worship the Lord with "gladness," or do we worship out of habit or obligation? Do we come into God’s presence with singing, or are we largely silent?

If worship is designed to praise God in God's presence, it ought to be joyful! Our church doors may not look like an ancient gate or the front door to home, but entering through them should be cause for praise and thanksgiving to God. When we worship, we should make a noise that shakes the whole earth!

Verse 3 offers the **reason *for that worship***. "Know that the LORD is God," says the psalmist. "It is [God] that made us and we are [God’s]; we are [God’s]people, and the sheep of [God’s]pasture." Entering the gates of the Lord's dwelling place, just like entering the doors of our childhood home, reminds us of who we are and from whence we came. Outside the gates we try to make a name for ourselves, making up our identity from our vocation, our bank account, our friendships and accomplishments. But inside the walls of God's presence, we remember who we are and to whom we belong. We are "the sheep of [God’s] pasture," and God's presence provides us better protection and better care than any defensive wall ever could. Worship reminds us that our identity begins and ends with God, the one who made us and cares for us.

In shaping our identity, **worship also shapes our worldview**. If God is the one who made us all, then we also find our identity with the people of "all the earth." Worship pushes us beyond the boundaries of race and nationality, and helps us to recognize that we are not called to be at home with just our people, but with all God's people. The gates of God's presence are wide open to a multitude of travelers coming from all over the place, all made to be focused on reflecting the image of God within them, rather than reflecting on their differences. They're called to join in making a "joyful noise," a cacophony of sounds in many languages, all giving worship to God. Worship is the universal language of God's world, and, no matter where we call home, we're called to join together in thanks and praise.

Indeed, that's the command of the next line, verse 4: "Enter [God’s] gates with thanksgiving, and [God’s] courts with praise. Give thanks to [God], bless [God’s] name." Why offer thanks and praise? "For the LORD is good; [God’s] steadfast love endures forever, and [God’s] faithfulness to all generations" (v. 5). We praise God because God is good, and we give thanks because God's love, grace and faithfulness have extended across the generations, even when God's people sometimes forget their identity. When "the sheep of [God’s] pasture" are wandering, God is still the shepherd who will keep searching until all of them are back in the fold (Luke 15:1-7). The gate remains open because the gatekeeper wants his sheep to come in and live an abundant life (John 10:7-10).

The walls of the Old City of Jerusalem are broken up by twelve gates. These gate all have names. Some are named for their purpose: the Sheep Gate, through which the sheep are herded into the city, or the Prison Gate through which prisoners entered confinement, or the Dung Gate out of which the trash is shoveled. Others are named for their location: the Valley Gate provides entrance from the Kidron Valley and the Gate of the Fountain near the Gihon Spring. Other gates are named for famous persons – the Herod Gate – or for the routes onto which they open – the Jaffa Gate and the Damascus Gate. All twelve gates are still in use, except one.

The East Gate, also the Golden Gate or the Beautiful Gate, is the gate nearest to the Temple Mount. The Eastern Gate was sealed shut in AD 1540–41 by order of Suleiman the Magnificent, a sultan of the Ottoman Empire. It’s believed that the reason for the closing of the Eastern Gate was to prevent the Jewish Messiah from gaining entrance to Jerusalem. Jewish tradition states that the Messiah will pass through the Eastern Gate when He comes to rule. The Muslim Suleiman was attempting to thwart the Messiah’s plans with sixteen feet of cement. The Eastern Gate has remained sealed for the past 477 years.

The book of Ezekiel contains several references to a gate that faces east. The prophet sees the glory of the Lord leave the temple through “the entrance of the east gate of the Lord’s house” (Ez. 10:18-19); the glory then moves east of the city to the Mount of Olives (Ez. 11:23). Later, Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord return to the temple via “the gate facing east” (Ez. 43:1-5).

Then we read of the gate being closed: “The man brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, the one facing east, and it was shut. The Lord said to me, ‘This gate is to remain shut. It must not be opened; no one may enter through it. It is to remain shut because the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered through it’” (Ez. 44:1-2) Finally, we read that there is one person, a “prince,” who may enter via the eastern gate: “When the prince provides a freewill offering to the LORD...the gate facing east is to be opened for him....Then he shall go out, and after he has gone out, the gate will be shut” (Ez. 46:12).

Some interpret these passages in Ezekiel as references to the Jesus Christ. The glory of the Lord coming into the temple is seen as the triumphal entry into Jerusalem n Palm Sunday (Ez. 43:2; Matt. 21:1-11). The command to permanently shut the gate because the Lord has entered it (Ez. 44:2) is seen as a prediction of the walling-up of the Eastern Gate by the Muslims in AD 1540. And, finally, the “prince” to whom the gate will be opened (Ez. 46:12) is seen as Christ Himself coming again at the end of time - the Prince of Peace will return to the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:4) and enter Jerusalem by way of the re-opened Eastern Gate.

As we await Christ’s coming again, we prepare by opening the gate to our heart, and welcoming him into our lives. With shouts of joy and cries of praise, we welcome the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Prince of Peace. Many of the great gates of the world are now more historical or ceremonial than they are the main passage in and out of the city. The gates into God's presence, however, are still open for business, inviting God's people to come and worship. We are invited into God's presence, and that's a great reason for thanksgiving!

**Source:**"The world's famous gates." Tales of a Traveler Website, December 10, 2011. papalengtraveladventure.com. Retrieved May 26, 2014.