

“Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her; that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance.”

That’s all well and good, but how do we rejoice in Jerusalem? How does our text from Isaiah make a hill of beans difference in the ears of a modern listener? 1. (oops!) Do we need to move to Israel?

Look at all the wonderful promises of this text! Rejoice with Jerusalem. Be satisfied from her. Have peace extended like a river. Be comforted in Jerusalem. All of these are promises from Isaiah 66 to us in today’s world, right?

Let’s move to Israel. We just have to establish permanent residence for three to five years, know some Hebrew, and renounce our U.S. citizenship. However, that’s a small price to pay for peace, prosperity, and joy, right?

Well, if you read the news, look at history books, or even visit yourself, peace, prosperity, and joy don’t characterize modern Israel and Jerusalem. Israel has a lower standard of living than the United States. Parents, don’t forget that your children will be drafted for mandatory military service at age 18 and over.

Okay, so I probably don’t have to twist your arm to convince you to stay in the United States. I think most of us can agree this text isn’t primarily about the physical city of Jerusalem in the Middle East.

Maybe the point is to look around us. Maybe Jerusalem is right here. 2. (ugh!) Maybe we're living there right now! Jesus said, **“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”** For the people hearing Jesus in that day, they likely viewed Jerusalem as that city on a hill. If you ever visit Jerusalem, you understand it is indeed set on a hill. So maybe Jerusalem in Isaiah 66 is any city set on a hill, so to speak, any exceptional and amazing place.

On this fourth of July weekend, we would be remiss if we didn’t make mention of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The fifty-six men who signed the Declaration of Independence had a vision of peace, prosperity, and joy in their minds, and they were ready to risk their lives.

Five signers were captured by the British as traitors and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons in the revolutionary army, another had two sons captured. Nine of the fifty-six fought and died from wounds or hardships of the revolutionary war.

Many Americans have sought this country to be that city on a hill. There are over two hundred towns in the United States named after cities mentioned in the Bible. Likewise, we see this in the poem of Emma Lazarus about the Statue of Liberty. Lady Liberty cries out, “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” The flaming torch is a glowing world-wide welcome. Talk about a city on a hill! Talk about the light of the world!

From JFK to Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, many politicians have worked this idea of *a city on a hill* into their speeches. We as Americans are proud of our country, and many have died for this country to be the land of the free and the home of the brave.

But for as proud as we are of our country on this 4th of July weekend, we see there are still problems. We are hardly the Jerusalem, that city on a hill, that Isaiah talks about. We ourselves are looking for that joy, that prosperity, that peace, and that comfort promised in our Old Testament text.

The first reference to America as a city on a hill was by Puritan leader John Winthrop. He preached a sermon in 1630 in England right before the first group from the Massachusetts Bay Colony would embark on a trip to New England. John Winthrop was leading a group of Christians to America.

He writes, “We must delight in each other; make other’s conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways.... We shall find that the God of Israel is among us... when he shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding colonies, “The Lord make it like *New England*.” We must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and byword through the world.”

John Winthrop’s point is not that America is a city on a hill, but wherever God’s people are gathered is the city on a hill. On this fourth of July weekend, as much as we wish blessings upon our country, we realize that we don’t rejoice in Jerusalem by rejoicing in the United States.

We reach our point as we look at verse 12 of our text, “**For thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip, and bounced upon her knees.”** 3. (Aha!) Jerusalem is wherever the Lord extends peace like a river. Where else do we see peace extending like a river other than the baptismal font through which we receive a washing that gives us peace with the God of the Universe? Where else do we nurse and are satisfied than the Church which is a hospital for sinners and where we “**Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—**” WE REJOICE OVER THE CHURCH WHICH IS THE HEAVENLY JERUSALEM.

4. (Whee!) This Heavenly Jerusalem is wherever the Saints gather. This text is ultimately talking about wherever God’s people gather together. This includes a Sunday church service, but also whenever God’s people gather together to do His work.

The Lord speaks through Isaiah saying, **“As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bones shall flourish like the grass; and the hand of the LORD shall be known to his servants, and he shall show his indignation against his enemies.”**

We see that the original fulfillment of this prophecy did indeed come true in the physical city of Jerusalem. This prophecy was fulfilled as the Lord brought us comfort through His Son Jesus. Jesus died on the hill outside the gates of the city as He bled on the cross. He rose again and we rejoice at His defeat of our enemies: sin, death, and the devil.

These blessings flow out like a river from Golgotha to all nations where Christians gather. The city on a hill is no longer Jerusalem the city in Israel, and it never was America. The Jerusalem which receives this joy, peace, prosperity, and comfort is the Church. This is what John Winthrop had in mind with his original sermon. He had in mind a community that was rooted and grounded in the reality of faith in Christ Jesus.

The Saints assembled around Word and Sacrament is the Saints assembled around the cross of Christ, and this is how we rejoice in Jerusalem. On this weekend as we honor and commemorate the birth of our nation, we also acknowledge that the Church is a nation that transcends earthly borders and welcomes people of every earthly tribe, language, and nation.

Yet even now, things aren’t perfect. The gathered saints in many ways reflect the fallen world around us. 5. (Yeah!) This Heavenly Jerusalem will be fully realized when Christ comes again.

In the last chapters of the Bible, we have a vision of what is to come: **“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”** What is already here, namely, the Church, will be fully realized as Jesus comes again to establish the new Jerusalem where there will be no more tears, death, or pain. *This* is the city on a hill for which we strive.

How do we rejoice in Jerusalem? We rejoice in Jerusalem not by putting our hope in any city or country of this Earth, but by putting our hope in Jesus Christ who provides His Church from which we receive forgiveness, life, and salvation, and as we keep receiving these gifts we are empowered as salt and light awaiting the day when Christ will come back to make all things right, and we will be able to rejoice in Jerusalem yet more fully as we dwell in the city of on a hill forever.