

## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM OUR STAY AT AGUDAS ACHIM?

### Psalm 48

*A sermon preached by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 25, 2007, for the congregation of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, worshipping at the Agudas Achim Congregation during renovation. This Sunday marks the final Sunday at which Westminster will worship at Agudas Achim, as the renovation is near completion.*

#### Focus Text

*Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. God is known in her palaces for a refuge. For, lo, the kings were assembled, they passed by together. They saw it, and so they marvelled; they were troubled, and hasted away. Fear took hold upon them there, and pain, as of a woman in travail. Thou breakest the ships of Tarshish with an east wind. As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God: God will establish it for ever. Selah. We have thought of thy lovingkindness, O God, in the midst of thy temple. According to thy name, O God, so is thy praise unto the ends of the earth: thy right hand is full of righteousness. Let Mount Zion rejoice, let the daughters of Judah be glad, because of thy judgments. Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it to the generation following. For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death.*

When I was a young person, the minister of our church served as a commissioner to the General Assembly, the then-annual meeting of our denomination. When he returned home, he preached a sermon entitled “Walk About Zion.”

- It was drawn from a phrase in Psalm 48, in which the psalmist urges the reader to “walk about Zion,” the holy city of Jerusalem, “count its towers, consider well its ramparts, go through its citadels.”
- Our minister then used this ancient phrase to “walk” the congregation through the Presbyterian Church, giving his assessment of what he had learned from ten days at the General Assembly.

On this, the final Sunday of our regular worship here, it is worthwhile, to take stock, “to walk about Agudas Achim, to walk about Westminster,” to see what we have learned from our time at Agudas Achim.

Let us pray: *Lord God, we give you thanks for the people of Agudas Achim, for their hospitality, their welcome, their genuine joy at our presence in their midst; for the comfort of their holy space; and for the way their hospitality and their space have enabled our congregation to grow and develop during this period of nomadic existence. May my speaking and our hearing bear witness to the work you have done and continue to do between our two congregations. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*

Let’s begin with the psalm. As the psalmist “walks about Zion,” the psalmist notices the “beauty” of the city. “Beautiful for situation,” the psalmist says, “the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion.” But the psalmist’s marveling at the of the city leads him – in the next breath – to attributes of God that under gird the city’s beauty.

While exercising restraint in labeling God “beautiful,” the psalmist moves from beholding the beauty of the city to beholding God

- As great
- As sure defense
- As steadfast
- As triumphant over enemies
- As just
- As guide forever.

One commentator notes that the beauty of the city leads the psalmist to contemplate persons, places, and actions associated with God that the psalmist experiences as beautiful.<sup>1</sup>

Persons, places, and actions. This is the beauty we have experienced from our time as Agudas Achim.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), Psalm 48:1-14n, page 793.

First, *persons*.

Between the time you voted to call me as your pastor and the time I moved here, I was standing in a furniture store in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the town from which I moved here, when my cell phone rang. On the other end of the line the caller identified himself as Rabbi Jack Moline, calling to welcome me to Alexandria.

- Jack was the first person outside Westminster members to welcome me.
- A few days after I moved here, we met for breakfast, and he made it clear that when we did our renovation, not only would we be welcome at Agudas Achim, but we would probably cause great collective disappointment to their congregation if we did not worship here.

The beauty of that welcome only intensified when, two years later, June 18, 2006, Jack, his family, and several members of the congregation joined us in the Rose Garden at Westminster to process to Agudas Achim. Then when a hundred or more of their members formed a line outside their door and welcomed us with handshakes and applause, we were overwhelmed. There wasn't a dry eye on the sidewalk!

Throughout the year, members and staff of Agudas Achim have expressed sheer delight at the buzz of our presence, and regret as the time has drawn near for us to depart.

The beauty of the *persons* who welcomed us.

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Second, place.

Our fear of being out of our worship space soon dried up once we arrived in this space.

- It is a beautiful space.
- It is a holy space.
- We could hear.
- We could see.
- We were cool in summer and warm in winter.
- The choir sounded great.
- And the seats...ahh, the seats!

Our curiosity grew as we explored our new, albeit temporary, home. We wanted to know what the Table represents, what the flames and lights on the Torah represent, what the Hebrew phrases on the walls say in translation. And we wanted to know the meanings behind the artwork on the pillars.

The place turned out to be beautiful, and the fears many of us had about the effect of the move on our congregational life turned to naught.

- Our attendance increased during our time at Agudas Achim.
- So did our membership.
- Our financial giving increased quite a bit.
- We not only welcomed over fifty new members while we were here, but among those were people who had never worshiped with us at 2701 Cameron Mills. We simply hope they will go with us next Sunday!

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Third, the beautiful *actions*.

- The leaders of Agudas Achim basically said: "When you are in the space, it is yours for Christian worship. Do not curtail your words, your gestures, your beliefs, out of deference to us."
- We said: "We will minimize the Christian symbols we bring in."
- They said: "We do have to ask you to keep Kosher, if for no other reason than it is complicated and costs us time and money to re-purify our kitchen when Kosher is broken."
- We said: "We'll use your coffee, make special vessels for communion and baptism, move our congregational meals elsewhere, and stave off Krispy Kreme's bankruptcy by serving their products."

- They said: “Hey, you all are probably taking it further than you need to.”
- We said: “We would really like to provide Hallah bread for our new members, can you give us a blessing to read as we receive them?”

That beauty of what we experienced together extended to experiences of education and worship.

- We sponsored a joint benefit concert early in our time here.
- They invited us to join them in unrolling the Torah around the Social Hall. Those of us present have the events chronicled in first five book books of the Bible memorized in reverse order because of Jack’s recitation of them backward.
- We asked them about the symbols in their sanctuary and printed articles in our Chronicle Update and Chronicle.
- We shared several adult education sessions.
- And together we experienced three Tuesday nights in the middle of winter what affectionately became known as “The Jack and Larry Show,” a sharing which Jack and I both agreed was one of the best experiences of our respective ministries, and one that involved the least preparation!

One of our members saw today’s sermon title and emailed me experiences she has received from our time at Agudas Achim. She writes:

- The joy of being in an environment that connects me with my Jewish roots and my growing up in Alexandria (I saw family names I recognized among the donor recognitions; I loved participating in the Torah unfurling ceremony—this was the first time I touched and saw the Torah up close. It made it real.)
- The uplifted feeling I get being in the light-filled, open worship space
- A sense of being a part of the expanded community of faiths in Alexandria
- The things I learned in the class with you and Jack
- Closer relationship with those conducting the service and the choir and musicians, due to the openness of the space
- The “Westminster on the Move” t-shirts and the walk over – I felt a part of the Westminster whole then and in the whole time we were “away from home”
- Being able to see everyone who is in attendance at church because of the layout (I imagine our remodeled space will provide similar benefits)

Her letter speaks of the beauty of people, the beauty of place, the beauty of actions. People/place/action. “Beautiful for situation, the joy of the earth, is Mount Zion.”

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As the Coalition – the group in our church responsible for managing the renovation – has moved to complete its work, we came convinced that the relationship with Agudas Achim was worthy of more than verbal thank you’s and the small utility donation we are making. We felt we needed to offer a tangible gift. We all pretty much settled on a gift in the neighborhood of \$10,000.

Several ideas came in: a commissioned piece of art, a memorial donation to a local charity; but the idea most suggested was that we pay to complete one of the pillars Agudas Achim is in the process of completing.

I knew from Jack that the pillars were a way Agudas Achim was raising money to pay off their debt on this facility. I figured the price to “buy a pillar” was \$50,000 or more. I shared that with the Coalition and they asked me to explore the idea with Jack.

I did.

He said the price was \$100,000. “But,” he said, “I’ll take it to the board.”

A week ago, I received a letter, dated March 6, 2007.

*Dear Larry:*

*On behalf of Agudas Achim Congregation, I want to express delight in being able to open our synagogue to you during your renovation. Agudas Achim members have been touched by the gratitude expressed by members of Westminster.*

*In response to your generous desire to present Agudas Achim with a gift when you return to Westminster, the Board as decided that your offer to contribute to the dedication of one of the pillars would be a lovely and permanent way to honor the relationship between the two congregations. We have a pillar that represents "Community," which seems a perfect symbol. Agudas Achim will be able to present Westminster with a framed paper cut of the column prepared by the artist. It's important to us that there is a visible reminder of the connection at both places of worship. In addition in your honor, Agudas Achim will make an annual donation to ALIVE!*

*We wish you well in your newly renovated worship space and hope that there will be time for the congregations to participate in joint events in the future.*

*Regards,*

*Evelina Moulder  
President  
Agudas Achim Congregation.*

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When the psalmist speaks of the beauty of Zion and calls hearers to "walk about Zion," the psalmist issues this call "that you may tell the next generation that it is good." While the psalmist affirms the beauty of Zion in the present, his major purpose is bearing witness to future generations of the protection and presence of God.

Our experience of beauty with Agudas Achim has been wonderful in the present, but its real significance lies with what we do with it in the future.

- The emailer said: "Are there any plans or programs in place for us to similarly connect with other faith communities in Alexandria? I'd love to get to know one of the African American congregations as well as we've gotten to know Agudas Achim folks."
- The letter from the Agudas Achim Board said: "We...hope that there will be times for the congregations to participate in joint events in the future."

After our joint concert last year, after our unrolling of the Torah this Fall, after the each sessions Jack and I led, several members said: "With all the pain and division in the world, this kind of joint effort, dialogue is exactly what needs to happen."

My friends, we at Westminster, like our brothers and sisters at Agudas Achim, are only one congregation in a war torn and divided world. But as we move back to the beauty of our space, we simply must take the beauty of the people, place, and actions we have experienced with Agudas Achim and build on them for future generations.

- Building on what we have started may not end the war in Iraq in a way we can all be satisfied.
- It may not bring the various parties in the Middle East closer together.
- It may not end genocide in Darfur, or lessen what many of you describe as one of the most poisonous times in politics in our city and nation.

But who knows?  
Maybe,  
Just maybe,  
Working together,  
With people with whom we don't share everything  
Just may make a difference  
In our world.

Amen.