

Bragging About the Right Stuff

Jeremiah 9:23-24; Psalm 87; I Corinthians 1:18-31

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All great cities brag. They gather their energy, produce their images of success and prosperity, and unleash their propaganda in ads, slogans, and campaigns. They do so because they know, intuitively, that stories of success and prosperity draw people, mobilize resources, generate jobs, accumulate wealth, and eventually—raise the standard of living—for some.

I.

No great city ever did a better job of bragging than that ancient city of Jerusalem in the Old Testament. Beginning with David and especially with Solomon, Jerusalem gathered its poets and storytellers and liturgists and ad men and sloganeers and made its claim for its urban elite. The bragging took the form of liturgic theology:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble...
God is in the midst of the city;
it shall not be moved. (Ps. 46:1, 5)

In the Psalm we read (87), it is claimed that:

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
O city of God.

The glorious things are spoken of God...the one who lives and saves and guards and protects and guarantees. But when they said glorious things of God, they also said glorious things of the city:

This is the city of God;
This is the place of the temple;
This is the seat of the king;
This is the place where are gathered all hopes and fears;
This is the place of promises...all will be well.

II.

Every great city brags, because it knows that self-celebration enhances life and produces a high standard of living for some. Every great city brags:

Atlanta, a city too busy to hate;
If you are tired of London, you are tired of life;
Chicago, Chicago, what a wonderful town;
Wonderful, wonderful Copenhagen;
Leave your heart in San Francisco;

How will you keep them down on the farm once they have seen Paris?
New York, New York, the city that doesn't sleep...

Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God! Glorious things of thee are spoken, Atlanta, London, Chicago, Copenhagen, San Francisco, Paris, Atlanta, Jerusalem, Atlanta. Glorious things!

No great city ever did a better job of bragging than that ancient city of Jerusalem in the Old Testament. Beginning with David and especially with Solomon, Jerusalem gathered its poets and storytellers and liturgists and ad men and sloganeers and made its claim for its urban elite. The bragging took the form of liturgic theology:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble. (Ps. 46:1)

God is in the midst of the city;
it shall not be moved. (Ps. 46:5)

In the Psalm we read (87), it is claimed that:

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
O city of God. (Ps. 87:3)

The glorious things are spoken of God...the one who lives and saves and guards and protects and guarantees. But when they said glorious things of God, they also said glorious things of the city. It is no wonder the wise men in Matthew came looking for the Messiah, the wave of the future, in Jerusalem:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." (Matt. 2:1-2)

The wise men had heard all those glorious things. They came, like tribal peasants in South Africa following the light to Johannesburg, sure that they would find there jobs and housing and well-being. It belongs to the great city, or so the great city says in its endless frenzy of self-promotion. All great cities brag about themselves...endlessly...to the advantage of some.

III.

It is likely that Psalm 87 comes early in the Israelite history of Jerusalem, perhaps from the liturgic committees of Solomon in 950 B.C.E. After that, the city had had a rather mixed history:

It had had an invasion from Egypt under Shishak;
It had been besieged by Sennacherib and the Assyrians;
It had seen a series of minor wars with petty neighbors, Northern Israel and Syria;

It had had a series of bad kings and consequent coups;
It had had prophets arise who summoned the city back to its senses;
It had had a couple of good kings, only a couple, Hezekiah and Josiah.

Then, after four hundred years, about 600 B.C.E., came Jeremiah, a villager who lived just to the north of the city. He and his family before him had watched the city through its four hundred years of misconduct and bad policy and mixed success. He had listened to the temple liturgy and he no doubt knew Psalm 87, and,

Psalm 84: "How Lovely are thy Dwelling Places"

Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and help"

Psalm 48:

Walk about Zion, go all around it,
count its towers,
consider well its ramparts;
go through its citadels,
that you may tell the next generation
that this is God,
our God forever and ever.

He will be our guide forever. (Ps. 48:12-14)

Jeremiah had noticed the use of the word "forever," a pretentious liturgical term assuring that the way it is, is the way it will be, the grand illusion of the successful and the prosperous about an absolute present tense.

Jeremiah watched, until he could keep silent no longer. And then he commented on urban bragging. He knew that all great cities bragged, but he wished that Jerusalem would not brag about that sorry stuff. He offers a simple triad of bad bragging:

Do not let the wise boast of their *wisdom*.
Do not let the mighty boast of their *might*.
Do not let the wealthy boast of their *wealth*.

But all great cities boast of *wisdom*, *might*, and *wealth*. That triad is what makes a city great. So imagine that ancient city of Jerusalem—or this contemporary city—bragging about its *wisdom*. Jerusalem would do so by reference to Solomon, the king who was said to be learned and wise in every way:

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. (1 Kings 4:29-30)

He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his

wisdom. (1 Kings 4:32-34)

Solomon was wise enough to know, and so to control, for he knew that “knowledge is power.” He knew it...in downtown Jerusalem! But we are no different. We are so glad for the research universities, so glad for corporate efforts at research and development, research that is never innocent but always in some interest, sometimes business, sometimes government, most often the military. Because economic advance does not come with stupidity or foolishness, but through the awareness of how the world works, and one needs a quota of the wise, the “stars” of the intellectual world, in order to stay ahead and grow.

So imagine, second, the ancient city of Jerusalem or—this contemporary city—bragging about its *might*. In the city we may boast of economic power and growth that, alas, invites new roads. Or we may brag about sports teams, only not just now in Atlanta, because it takes powerful sports teams—with the ensuing sex and violence—to be a world-class city. But urban culture is larger than the city. And eventually might comes to the military. For it is the city that needs the army to protect its banks and the great concentrations of wealth and advantage and high standard of living that others want in on. So Solomon had might to match his wisdom:

He made three hundred shields of beaten gold; three minas of gold went into each shield; and the king put them in the House of the Forest of Lebanon. The king also made a great ivory throne, and overlaid it with the finest gold. The throne had six steps. The top of the throne was rounded in the back, and on each side of the seat were arm rests and two lions standing beside the arm rests. (1 Kings 10:17-19)

For the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the fleet of the ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks. (1 Kings 10:22)

And we in our might, so mighty that we “fly over,” but get Canadians and Brits to do the ground war for us, because we are mighty enough that others will do our dirty work.

So imagine, third, that ancient city of Jerusalem—or this contemporary city—bragging about its *wealth*. Solomon’s wealth came because he controlled the land bridge at the Fertile Crescent and stood at the center of the global economy:

Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. Every one of them brought a present, objects of silver and gold, garments, weaponry, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year. Solomon gathered together chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and he made cedars as numerous as the sycamores of the Shephelah. (1 Kings 10: 23-27)

If only it weren’t for Charlotte, Atlanta could brag more about the Southeast, its

Fortune 500 world headquarters, and our special share of the Gross National Product, and better jobs and more growth, and the “New South,” and the matrix so much of the world economy, etc., etc., etc.

Three things, said Jeremiah, not to brag on: By now you know the mantra:

Do not let the wise boast of their *wisdom*.
Do not let the mighty boast of their *might*.
Do not let the wealthy boast of their *wealth*.

They are three items but really all one. One by convergence to have autonomy and the world on our own terms. Solomon has become a metaphor in that ancient world for wisdom, might, and wealth. So big, so impressive, so proud, so independent, so safe, so happy. And Jeremiah said:

Do not let the wise boast of their *wisdom*.
Do not let the mighty boast of their *might*.
Do not let the wealthy boast of their *wealth*.

IV.

Well, they must have answered Jeremiah in indignation: “Don’t you think we should brag, given who we are?” And he answered, apparently without blinking, “Yes you can brag but you might not want to brag on wisdom, might, and wealth.” And they said, “What else is there to brag on?” And he answered, apparently having his response at the ready:

Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jer. 9:24)

His is a quick, terse response. Jeremiah gives Jerusalem another triad for bragging. Brag that you know YHWH, the God of the covenant. This God delights in: *steadfast love, justice, righteousness*. Brag about the things that please the God of Israel:

—Brag about *steadfast love*, about staying power and keeping vows and promises, about long-term fidelity whereby haves and have-nots, rich and poor, and black and white stay with each other in a common destiny because there are no private deals, no gated communities that can be safe, no private schools that can opt out, no protected oases because all are bound to all even as God is bound to Israel.

—Brag about *justice*, about the practice of economic viability in which the great money revenues of the most fabulous wealth in the world is put to use for all the neighbors in terms of health care, adequate housing, childcare, good schools—all readily do-able when the Body Politic comes to know that we are all in it together, that justice is the willingness to submit the economy to the requirements of the neighborhood, in which must some cap their income and their leisure and their self-indulgence in order that all may live well.

—Brag about *righteousness*, a vision of a society in viable, sustainable equilibrium, a harmony of neighbors in which none need to be gouging and threatening others and

none need be fearful, because common joy and common hope are rooted in common shalom.

V.

Well, Jeremiah must have taken their breath away with such a simple, all comprehending contrast: Not brag: *wisdom, might, wealth*. Brag: *steadfast love, justice, righteousness*. The practice of the second triad is of course complicated, but the agenda is clean and simple, and rooted in the reality of God among us.

Jeremiah knows that the city is destined to failure if it continues to brag about the wrong stuff. But Jeremiah knows that even as late as it is, an alternative agenda for bragging is on offer, bragging that is not engaged in illusion and self-deception, but that is rooted in God's own delight.

Boast of the things that belong to God, for these are the very things that make a city work. Paul lives close to Jeremiah because they are on the same wavelength. In his theology of the cross, Paul makes a contrast not unlike that of Jeremiah:

God's foolishness in the cross is wiser than *human wisdom*;
God's weakness in the cross is stronger than *human strength*.

And then he finishes with Jeremiah:

Consider your call brothers and sisters:

God chose not *the wise*, not *the strong*, not *the wealthy*;
God chose the weak;
God chose the foolish;
God chose what is low and despised, things that are not.

And then finally, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Perhaps you are like me. Always glimpsing toward *wisdom* in the ways of the world; *might*, in controlling a little piece of the action; *wealth*, not wealthy, but a little more; and then caught short by the teaching of Jesus about *steadfast love, justice, and righteousness*. And so there we are, needing to choose, not wanting to choose, but able to choose and being offered life.

The city, every great city, that ancient one and this contemporary one, wants to brag about its successes and turn out to brag about the very matters that lead to death: wisdom, might, wealth. Imagine that this great church, and dozens like it, exist in the city to witness loud and endlessly to the city that our true ground for bragging is elsewhere: not the fashionable, urban agenda of *wisdom, might, wealth*—but the stuff that delights God: *steadfast love, justice, righteousness*. The gospel to which the church testifies in the city may be put this way: brag! But get it right! Delight in the delights of the God of neighborly fidelity. And then brag...endlessly!