

Lift Up the Doors
Sermon for the 1st Sunday in Advent
Sermon Text: Psalm 24:1-10



The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, ²for He has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers. ³Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in His holy place? ⁴He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. ⁵He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation. ⁶Such is the generation of those who seek Him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. ⁷Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. ⁸Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle! ⁹Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. ¹⁰Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory!

In Jerusalem, there is a golden gate that leads directly to the Temple. According to Christian tradition, Jesus rode through that first golden gate when He came to Jerusalem. This gate, along with the walls of Jerusalem, was destroyed in the year 70 A.D. Sultan Suleiman rebuilt these walls during the Middle Ages but had the golden gate walled up. As you can see in the picture, it is still blocked up. Sultan Suleiman, the same ruler who issued the decree to seal the golden gate, must have heard rumors that the Jewish Messiah would come through this gate and defeat His enemies. That's why he had the gate walled up, to deter the Messiah. Interestingly, this same sultan also created a cemetery on the inside of the gate. Obviously, he truly believed in the coming of the Messiah because he knew that the Messiah wouldn't cross over graves therefore becoming unclean, according to Jewish tradition! Sultan Suleiman didn't know though that Jesus already came. He may also have been unaware that Jesus no longer enters the Temple in Jerusalem, but any place where two or three gather in His name.

"Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors," Psalm 24 calls out. Open wide the gates and the ancient doors, wherever two or three people are gathered in the name of Jesus, sometimes in dangerous conditions. Open wide the gates and ancient doors wherever people stand on the outskirts of the congregation, where they maybe are thinking about leaving the congregation or whether they can even enter inside. Open wide the gates and doors wherever hearts within our congregation are closed to God's Word, where it may no longer hold any meaning for us, or where love has become cold.

The Psalmist cries out that the gates of the Temple should be opened wide and, at the same time, asks the question: "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?" At that time, the Israelites sang Psalm 24 as they entered the Temple. The priest solemnly cried out: "Who shall stand in His holy place?" At these words, the Israelite congregation confessed: "He who has clean hands and a pure heart!" This statement referred to the 10 Commandments and meant: "Only those who please God not only through good deeds, but also through a pure heart, may enter!" Not everyone was allowed into the Temple. Those wanting to celebrate stood in front of the Temple gate, but it wasn't a given that everyone was allowed to enter. Whoever wanted to stand before God had to examine their conscience. God is everywhere; His presence stretches not only into the Temple but throughout the entire world. The question is not where God is and where He is not, rather the question is whether our human condition is reconcilable with God. The psalmist shows us with striking words with whom we are dealing when we go into God's presence. We shouldn't just *think* about God when we go into church but submit our whole lives to Him. When I stand before God, I stand before Him who holds the world in His hands. The earth belongs to the Lord and no other. God made me and everything else in the world, we didn't do any of it. We should acknowledge God in our private lives and understand Him as the Creator and Author of everything. Everything that I am and have, belongs to God – my body, my house, my family, the things that I use in the world – everything is subordinate to

the living God. We have just borrowed these things from Him. "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors." The Psalmist wants to encourage us to see and proclaim God's authority in everything but to ask at the same time the question of conscience: "Who may enter in?" Those who have clean hands! The hands represent all other organs, they put into practice what the whole person wants. Hands can do a lot of good. We use our hands to earn a living and to provide for ourselves and our family. But the hands are also capable of evil. They grab other people's property and inflict violence on others. By doing nothing, we can also do evil! Where have our hands failed to support someone in need? What did these hands do or not do in 2023? When it comes to our hands, we can still justify ourselves to some extent and at least appear good to others. But when it comes to the heart, everything is at stake! This is where God asks about origin and being. "Who are you?" We must pause: Isn't our heart like the golden gate in Jerusalem – walled up and impassable for the Messiah? Isn't what the true Messiah, Jesus, said also apply to us: We "are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness" so that the Messiah has no place with us? (Matt. 23:27) Yes, although God is present everywhere, we try to suppress His presence. We act as if He isn't here or as if His commandments no longer apply. When Psalm 24 asks about the works of the hands and the state of the heart, it is not just looking at external actions but at our nature. He wants to know nothing less than the answer to the question: "Who are you?" And depending on how you answer this question, you may either enter into God's presence or not. "So, who are you?" The answer should be without a doubt: "God's child." Yet at the same time, the practical reality of my life and everything I do and am, stands in stark contrast to this attribute. Any child would say to us: "You don't look anything like your dad!" In other words: there is little evidence of God in us and in some places, we are even in stark contradiction to everything that comes from God. And as a Christian community, we also must ask ourselves the question: Christ is the light. He wants to shine into the world so that many can be saved. But can the others out there see Christ in us?

Jesus called those who have a pure heart blessed. This seems to be a direct reference to Psalm 24. If the heart is good, everything else is good too. The heart is comparable to the software of a computer. If the software is good and there are no viruses, the whole computer works. Jesus is the only one with such a pure nature! He is the only one whose heart and actions are in total harmony, without contradictions. Jesus came to earth precisely so that we can be His children. He wants all people to be saved, for hearts and hands to be in harmony, and for us to become and remain God's children. And if He wants this, He will do everything He can so that His will can be fulfilled. Jesus does everything necessary so that we can be saved and so that we can confess from the bottom of our hearts: "I am a Christian! I am a child of God! I am loved!"

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart" and shortly before that, He says to the same people: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." (Matt. 5:3, 8) Yes, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. So, we should answer the question of who can enter the Temple with: anyone who wants to have a pure heart and a righteous life, but who also recognizes that this is so often not the case. Only one person is actually worthy to enter the Temple – that is Christ. But this same Christ doesn't want anyone to be left on the outside. No one should be left behind because they think that they are too unworthy and therefore can't enter because Jesus Christ came precisely for sinners. His sacrifice is so great that it can cover even the worst sins. We can come with guilty hands and unclean hearts – this is precisely why Jesus came to earth for us! Because heaven is meant for those who don't know what to do next and don't know how they can stand before God. Through Jesus, we can joyfully and confidently enter in and call out to the whole world: "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in!" Amen.