

Advent as a Civil Engineering Project

About thirty five years before our nation declared independence from England, a British composer--George Frideric Handel--was putting the finishing touches on his musical *tour de force* that still transports audiences through the life of Christ. Handel's Messiah remains a classic expression of the Christian faith, drawn from the words of the prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospels.

One of the popular selections from the oratorio comes from a portion of Psalm 24:

"Lift up your heads, O gates;
lift them high, O everlasting doors;
and the King of glory shall come in."

I have rehearsed and sung these lyrics many times without really thinking about what they mean. Perhaps you also have grown accustomed to hearing this familiar music without considering just what would be required to lift up the heads of gates in order to welcome the King of glory in.

One of the blessings I have received this fall by participating in the Bishop's Bible challenge is to read the psalms more slowly and deliberately than one can manage under the pressure of rehearsing Handel's *Messiah*. This is one of those places where I paused recently to contemplate about what the Psalmist was singing.

Several years ago I had an opportunity to visit Greece and travel along St. Paul's missionary journey through Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth. One of the "side trips" we made during that trip was to the ancient archeological site of Mycenae. The Mycenae Civilization peaked between 1600 - 1200 B.C. Mycenae was home of the legendary, powerful and mythical King Agamemnon from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.



One of the most impressive views of the ruins at Mycenae is the front gate of the citadel. It is carefully designed as a narrow passageway to prevent an opposing king (and his armies) from making a full frontal assault.

It is also carefully designed to be an impenetrable mass of stone that could not be toppled. The Lion Gate you see in this picture is built of four well-dressed blocks of conglomerate stone: the threshold, the doorjamb and the lintel. The lintel (or "head") of this gate weighs about 18 tons! Above that lintel rests a decorative limestone sculpture about 9 feet tall and 12 feet wide.

What would it take to lift the head of this gate so that the King of glory could come in? The Psalmist knew all about defensive gates, designed and built as narrowly and sturdily as possible, to prevent outside kings from entering. In Psalm 24, the Lord is described as strong and mighty in battle.

And yet, in Bethlehem we meet a glorious king, a Messiah, who arrives much more quietly. The angels who appear in the heavens to sing of his glory do not raise a battle cry. Rather, they sing of Glory to God and *peace on earth*.

Advent comes as a civil engineering project for us. Anticipating the arrival of our King of glory--not in a military assault, but in a manger--we are challenged to enlarge the passageway to our hearts and to our lives. And this can mean doing some heavy lifting, because we are just as clever as the Mycenaeans when it comes to guarding ourselves. Yet, we also trust that glorious promise: Lift up your heads, O Gates, and the King of glory will come in!