

Sermon: This is the Temple of the Lord

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, June 12, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It really is a bit of Jackal and Hyde. I am referring to the mountain of Jerusalem, which played such a profound role throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament. On that mountain, the city that was built atop, and the temple that was built within, has been central to the religious consciousness of believers in every age, even till now.

As God's plan of redemption unfolded in the Scripture, Jerusalem became a leading symbol of Israel's trust that the Lord God had established David and his descendants on that imperial throne, forever. Yet, prophets of Israel had consistently spoke against the corruption that was happening within the royal city, and warned about a mis-placed trust in the temple of the Lord.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we continue to journey through the mountains of Israel, we have come to Jerusalem, to the city where God had planted His footstool, His eternal living presence on earth.

The biblical origin of Jerusalem could be traced to the ancient Canaanite site of Salem, the city of the priestly king Melchizedek in Genesis 14. Jerusalem is also identified in Genesis 22 (and in 2 Chronicle 3) as Mount Moriah, where Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice, although that identification as I explained three weeks ago is not altogether certain. We do know, however, that the site was called Jebus before David conquered it. Jerusalem then became a city of central theological significance, when David established it as the capital of Israel, and brought the Ark of the Covenant, the very footstool of God, into the royal city. This cohabitation of divine and human kingship was further strengthened by the construction of Solomon's temple, by the most skillful artists and craftsmen, using the most expensive and durable materials, all according to the design of the Lord. Therefore psalmist praises the city, "I was glad when they said to me, *"Let us go to the house of the Lord!" Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together. To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.*" (Psalm 122)

Pilgrims from across Israel streamed toward Jerusalem, willingly and joyfully they came, not only as part of their religious obligation. Even foreigners from across Ancient Near East came to pay their homage, including the Queen of Sheba, or Queen of the South from the ends of the earth came. Jerusalem really was a glorious sight to behold, the zenith of the Kingdom of Israel in the presence of the Living God, Yahweh, the Lord God Almighty.

Yet, corruption and disobedience within its very wall ran rampant. Amos, the 8th century BCE prophet of Israel had already warned that the ruling class of Jerusalem had “*rejected the instruction of the Lord, and had not kept the statutes of God, and had been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked*” (Amos 2:4). By the time we come to Jeremiah, the 6th century prophet of Judah, Jerusalem was described as a ‘den of robbers’ where people “*steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that they have not known*” (Jeremiah 7:9).

What was even worse, the people of God had fallen into a false theology that as long as a descendant of David sits on the throne, and as long as the temple of the Lord is secure within, the city of Jerusalem shall never fall. They said most self-assuredly, “**This is the temple of the Lord! This is the temple of the Lord!** And we are safe!”

One could almost understand how the people of Judah came to that misplaced trust during the time of Jeremiah, when the mighty army of the invading Babylonians was camped outside the city wall. Only a couple of centuries earlier, during a very similar circumstance when the Assyrians were besieging the city, Prophet Isaiah assured the people and counselled King Hezekiah to stand firm and resist the aggressors. That very same night, an angel of the Lord swept through the Assyrian camp, and 185,000 soldiers were killed most mysteriously (Isaiah 36-37 and 2 Kings 18-19). The Lord of Host came to Jerusalem’s rescue. It was believed most understandably, that God will keep the city of God eternally secure. But it came not to be.

Jerusalem did fall. The Babylonians were, as Prophet Jeremiah prophesied, the instrument of God’s punishment for the corruption within the city of God. The people of God was sent into exile, resulting in this lament, “*By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion (that is Jerusalem). On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our*

tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
(Psalm 137:1-3)

On the one hand, the destruction of Jerusalem came to symbolize the rejection of Israel. The blessings that once dwelt in the city were gone. *"I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will reject this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, 'My name shall be there.'"*, says the Lord (2 Kings 23:27). On the other hand, Israel's hope for restoration from exile was expressed by the image of a restored Jerusalem. When the people of God returned from exile in 539 BCE, rebuilding the temple and the city was the top priority for the returnees.

Yet the same pattern of Jackal and Hyde, the same emotion of love and hate, of joy and sorrow, of praise and lament persisted right up till the time of Jesus. Jesus proclaimed that the work of Christ constituted the restoration of the people of God, *"to bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed"* (Luke 4:18-19). As such, the work of Christ was closely connected with the restored Jerusalem as he proclaimed the kingdom of God, the imperial destiny of God's chosen people. This destiny could only be realized, however, with Jerusalem as the place of divine and Davidic kingship.

Yet for all that manifest destiny, Jesus was particularly condemning of the temple, of what was happening inside it. When he first visited the temple, in our reading this week of the Gospel of John 2:13-22, Jesus found the people selling cattle, sheep, and doves and money changers seated at their tables. So he made a whip of cords, overturned their tables and drove all of them out of the temple of the Lord. When confronted by the religious authority of the day, *"What sign can you show us for doing this?"* Jesus replied, *"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."*

He was speaking of course of the temple of his body, a spiritual temple that was incomprehensible to the people that day. But after Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead, his disciples remembered and believed the words of their Lord.

So as the community of faith gathers, this day or any other day, this place or any other place, we ought to remember **this is the temple of the Lord**, not the one in the city of Jerusalem, not this sanctuary nor any other earthly structure. The body of Christ is the temple of the Lord! We as the community of faith, the Church, is the temple of the Lord.

So as we gather today, in preparation to partake in the Holy Communion, to receive the body and blood of Christ in remembrance of his crucifixion and resurrection. Let us also remember the words of Prophet Micah in 6:8 : ***what does the Lord require of us, but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.***

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.