

## Sermon: In Spirit and in Truth

(Preach by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, June 19, 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 is not an over-statement to say that whenever religion is co-opted to serve a political interest, disaster awaits. History is littered with examples of such, including the European colonialism from the 15th century onward, the on-going residential school saga here in Canada, the killing of Jews under Nazi Germany during WW II, Donald Trump waving a Bible in front of a church to rally his Republican base, or Putin's invasion of Ukraine under the backing of the Russian Orthodox Church. I could go on and on.

Although I do not generally subscribe to the thinking of Karl Marx, but his provocative statement that "religion is the opium of the masses" does and should give us, as practitioners of the Christian faith, pause. It is vital, therefore, that we ask: Why has God or the name of God been invoked, so readily and easily, to justify so many ugly chapters in human history?

In this seven-part sermon series, the Mountains of Israel, we have come to the hill of Samaria, where the ruling class of the Northern Kingdom of Israel tailor-made a synchronistic religion in 9th century BCE, to suit their own political ambition.

First a clarification on the geography of the area around Samaria. It is not a mountain but rather a hill, where Omri the King of Israel purchased for a pittance of two talents of silver. He then fortified it and built an impressive political dynasty from that hill. But it would not have been possible had it not been the two other mountains nearby: Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim.

Ebal and Gerizim first appeared in the Hebrew Bible, in Deuteronomy where Moses gave specific instructions to the Israelites when they cross over river Jordan. They were supposed to set up an altar on top of Ebal as part of an elaborate liturgy of covenantal renewal. The people were to be divided into two camps, one camp going up Mount Gerizim, the other going up Mount Ebal. The two camps were supposed to pronounce blessings and curses, as recorded in Deuteronomy 27, in turn. The two mountains, being in close proximity to each other, would allow this covenantal renewal be done in a liturgy of call and response, as the people from each camp would shout in unison, in turn, across the twin peaks.

It would've been a might sight to behold, and this liturgy was indeed carried out by Joshua, the successor of Moses, after the battle of Ai. More importantly, the city in-between Ebal and Gerizim was Shechem, a site of religious significance to Israel. Shechem was a place of promise, where Abram stopped at the tree of Moreh and received God's promise of the land. Shechem was a place of worship, as Abraham, Jacob and Joshua all built altars there and sacrificed to the Lord. In our Scripture passage today, Jeroboam, the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel set up the first capital at Shechem.

After David and Solomon, the united kingdom broke apart into the Northern Kingdom of Israel consisting of ten tribes and the Southern Kingdom of Judah consisting of the tribes of Benjamin and Judah. That story in itself is a sermon and a lesson for another day.

Anyway, Jeroboam, the first king of the breakaway Israel had a problem—the temple of Jerusalem was in, well, Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah. Jeroboam understood correctly the inherent need for the people to worship and to sacrifice to their God. So he was worried, rightfully, and said to himself, *“Now the kingdom may well revert to the house of David. If this people continues to go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn again to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and return to King Rehoboam of Judah.”* (1 Kings 12:26-27)

It was also awfully inconvenient geographically for his subjects to travel all the way to the south. So Jeroboam devised a scheme—he made two golden calves, just like the one made by Aaron at the foothill of Mount Sinai. And he said to the people, *“You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”* Jeroboam set one each in Bethel and Dan, the southern most and the northern most reach of his kingdom. It is one thing for Aaron to naively and mistakenly cast a golden calf to appease the people. It is another altogether for Jeroboam to make two golden calves, in order to control the people.

Furthermore, Jeroboam made houses on high places, namely the two shrines he built on top of Ebal and Gerizim. He also appointed priests who were not Levites, invented his own schedule of religious festivals, and gave himself priestly authority to offer incense and sacrifices on those self-proclaimed holy sites.

What is unrecorded in the Scripture, and biblical scholars are uncertain by whom or when it came to be, the Pentateuch or the first five books of Moses, used in the Northern Israel, was altered to fully justify everything Jeroboam did. In effect, Jeroboam had created a parallel religion for his people to worship the Lord God. However, what looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, is in fact no duck at all. This tailor-made religion of the north became a sin, a snare for the people of God. It was idolatry, pure and simple, based on the classical definition offered by Augustine, the early Church father, as worshipping anything that ought to be used, and using anything that ought to be worshiped.

The sin of Jeroboam was doubly tragic in that God had actually promised him blessings if he had just followed the path of David. *"If you will listen to all that I command you, walk in my ways, and do what is right in my sight by keeping my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did, I will be with you and will build you an enduring house, as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you."* (1 Kings 11:38)

In turning to calf-worship, Jeroboam spurned God's goodness and brought about his own eventual demise. However, the sin of Jeroboam became an archetype, a pattern followed by subsequent kings of Israel. So by the time of Omri, who actually built a worthy dynasty from the hill of Samaria, praised and feared by neighbouring nations, the Hebrew Bible had actually very little to say, except, *"Omri did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; he did more evil than all who were before him. For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam son of Nebat and in the sins that he caused Israel to commit, provoking the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger by their idols."* (1 Kings 16:25-26) Omri, as we know was the father of that infamous King Ahab, who with Jezebel, would later mix a number of Canaanite deities, Baal, Ashtoreth, Moloch into the worship of Yahweh, thus creating a perverse and synchronistic faith.

What Jeroboam, Omri, and later Ahab created reminds me of a story I once read, in *The Wounded Healer*, by author and theologian Henri Nouwen. Nouwen recounts a story of four royal brothers who decided to each master a special ability. "I have mastered a science," said the first, "by which I can take but a bone of some creature and create the flesh that goes with it." "I", said the second, "know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones." The third said, "I am able to create its limbs if I have flesh, the skin, and the hair." "And I," concluded the fourth, "know how to give life to that creature if its form is complete." So the brothers went

into a jungle to find a bone to demonstrate their newly mastered abilities. As fate would have it, the bone they found was a lion's. One added flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third complete it with matching limbs, and the fourth gave the lion life. Anyone care to guess what happens next? The ferocious lion once alive, shook its mane, arose and jumped on his creators. He killed the four brothers and vanished with a full belly into the jungle.

The monstrosity created by these kings of Israel, would go on to oppress widows, orphans, and aliens alike. Samaria would wage wars against Judah and against other neighbours constantly. It finally caught the attention of the mighty Assyrians, who invaded, besieged and destroyed the city in 722 BCE. The ten tribes of Israel would be sent into exile, never to return till this day. The Promised Land would be repopulated by others from across the Assyrian empire. The Israelites who remained would be forced into a state imposed mixed marriages, to so call 'dirty' the bloodline.

Their descendants became known as Samaritans in the time of Jesus, a mixed faith and mixed breed of people who were very much frowned upon by Jews and Gentiles alike. It is worth noting that Jesus never looked down on the Samaritans. The fact that he sat down by the well of Jacob, near Shechem, and open a real dialogue with an unclean Samaritan woman, shows how radical he was and how devoted he is to save all sinners. When the Samaritan woman raised that most contested and controversial topic of the day—on which mountain should one worship the one true God—Jesus explained in the Gospel of John, chapter 4, *“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father **in spirit and truth.**”*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the hour is here and that is where we are, earnestly seeking to worship the Triune God, not on Samaria, nor Shechem, nor Jerusalem, but **in spirit and truth**. Not worshipping a god of our own creation, nor attempting to dictate who God is, but humbly and faithfully worship the Triune God as revealed in the Holy Scripture. May the Lord God bless us as a worshipping community, and bless each one of us with a heart of true worship.

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