

Sermon: On the Mountain of Megiddo

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, June 26, 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.

Megiddo is really not a mountain, but a hill. More accurately, it is what an archeologist would call a ‘tell’, that is layers of settlements built on top of one after another in an often repeated cycle of construction, destruction, and reconstruction. Excavations have unearthed 20 strata of ruins since the Neolithic Age, indicating a long period of settlement since 5000 BCE. Megiddo drew much of its importance from the strategic location northwest of Samaria, at a junction of a pass through the Carmel ridge, and overlooking the rich Jezreel Valley. Given its strategic location, a number of major battles have occurred at Megiddo in history. But the most important one has yet to come.

Brother and sisters in Christ, in our journey through mountains of Israel, we have come to Mount Megiddo, or *Har Megiddo* in Hebrew, or its Greek equivalent of *Armageddon*—the final battle between forces of evil and the Lord of Hosts envisioned in the Book of Revelation.

The theological significance of Mount Megiddo should really be traced back to Josiah, the 7th century BCE king of Judah. Josiah became king at a very young age of 8, he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. Contrary to many other kings in Judah or in Israel, Josiah did what was right in the sight of the Lord and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left. 2 Kings 22 contains the story Josiah sending priests into the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, which had long been neglected, not misused but unused. As they were throwing out junks and dusting off cobweb, lo and behold, they discovered the long-lost book of the law, that is the Torah.

It is hard to imagine the people of God had actually gone through a prolong period where God was not in their central focus, but was in fact pretty much forgotten, relegated to merely a tradition of the past. So when Hilkiah, the high priest at that time, hurriedly brought the book to Josiah, exclaiming, “I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.” Upon reading this long-lost book, the boy king was so moved in spirit that he tore his cloth in lament, and began to institute major religious reforms.

Josiah put a halt to official worship of foreign gods, deities who were not gods but mere idols crafted by human hands. He tore down high places and removed houses and priests devoted to those misguided worship. He restored the Passover celebration and other festivals in accordance to the book of the law.

Josiah is also credited by most biblical scholars as having initiated the compilation of books in the 'Deuteronomistic history', including Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings. However, these religious reforms regrettably did not survive past his untimely death. 2 Kings 23 recorded briefly that death, with 2 Chronicles 35 elaborating a bit more.

The international politics at the time was in a state of flux. The Assyrian empire was crumbling due to repeated assaults by the emerging Babylonians. Neco II, Pharaoh of Egypt was leading a large military contingent to join force with Ashur-uballit II, the king of Assyria. For whatever reason that no one was able to understand, King Josiah decided to take his own small army, and rode out to meet Neco at Mount Megiddo. Neco was truly confused, he had no intention of doing battle with the Judeans, even sending a letter to Josiah saying, "what have we done to each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day." Josiah's ill fated attempt to block the advance of Neco at Megiddo ended in disaster. The young king was killed in battle. Judah became a vassal state of Egypt, with Josiah's sons taking turn serving the interest of Neco. According to the Scripture, they did evil in the sight of the Lord, more evil than their ancestors did.

Theologically speaking, the death of Josiah shook the national psyche. The Deuteronomistic historians were attempting to restore a long-forgotten doctrine of blessings and woes, that is walking in righteousness brings blessings, and conversely walking in wickedness brings ultimately God's wrath. Yet, here we have Josiah, a righteous king who walked in the way of the Lord, but still met an untimely and tragic death. Where and what justice is that?

Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? This unresolved theological tension, eventually gave rise to a distinctive literary genre in the Hebrew Bible, that is the Apocalyptic, a telescopic look into the end time where forces of good will triumph over forces of evil, and the justice and righteousness of God shall prevail, once and for all.

Fast forward to the time of Ezekiel, prophet in exile in the 6th century BCE. The book of Ezekiel is really a fascinating book. Although categorized as a Major Prophet, the book is actually a mixture of both prophetic and apocalyptic text. Starting from chapter 37 or so, the book contains a series of visions that all point not just to the future, but to the end of time. Some of these visions would get picked up in the book of Daniel, some you find echos in the New Testament Apocalyptic, particularly in the book of Revelation.

Take for example, the mythical figure of Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. He is portrayed in Ezekiel chapter 38-39 as a powerful leader of the north, who would one day muster armies from across the known world—Paras from the east, Cush and Put from the south, Gomer from

the northwest, Beth-togarmah, Meschech and Tubal from the north. They will all gather in Israel, a land restored from war, a land where people were gathered from many nations on the mountains of Israel, which had long lain waste; with its people now living in safety, all of them. It is not at first clear what Gog, leader of the horde intends. But soon, an evil scheme will be put into his head, as he looks on towards Israel, he will say, *“I will go up against the land of unwalled villages; I will fall upon the quiet people who live in safety, all of them living without walls and having no bars or gates, to seize spoil and carry off plunder.”* (Ezekiel 38:11)

Unknown to Gog, the Lord of Hosts stands ready to defend Israel, with heavenly hosts, with earthquake, pestilence, and with hail and fire from the sky. In one swift engagement, Gog and his vast horde will be no more. Thus the Lord God said, *“So I will display my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the Lord.”* (Ezekiel 38:23)

As I said earlier, the Book of Revelation picks up after Ezekiel, and in chapter 16, identifies the location of this great battle as the mountain of Megiddo, or in Greek ‘Armageddon’. The description and the participants of this final battle may change, Satan would now be leading the armies of Gog and Magog, but the result is all the same—the Lord God Almighty leading the forces of good shall triumph over evil.

There is an interesting sidebar on the identity of Gog from the land of Magog. For the past half a century or so, in the conservative evangelical circle of the U.S., there exists a persistent identification of Russia as Gog. The phrase ‘chief prince of Meshech and Tubal’ seemed to have been interpreted quite loosely and inaccurately. The word ‘chief’ in Hebrew is ‘*rosh*’. In a fairly early but much rejected translation of the English bible, ‘*rosh*’ was understood to be a proper noun, a geographical area named ‘Rosh’. There is no evidence that a country named Rosh ever existed in the time of Ezekiel. Russia as a country came much later, at eleventh-century A.D. In this line of interpretation, the phrase ‘chief prince of Meshech and Tubal’ becomes synonymous to ‘Russian prince of Moscow and Tobolsk’. Such mis-interpretation seemed to have served the political agenda of the United States during the Cold War, both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush were rumoured to be fervent believers that the mythical Gog is indeed Russia.

Though biblical interpreters have long debated on the identity of Gog, this anti-Christ figure who will become destroyer of the world, I think that is somewhat mis-focused. To me, the lesson of Mount Megiddo is not about who or where or when this final cosmic battle shall take place. The real lesson for us as the community of faith is looking at what the people of God actually do in this battle. They sit and wait upon the Lord. The people of God are described in the Book of

Ezekiel as living in the land of unwallled villages. They are quiet people, seemingly defenceless, living in safety, trusting that the Lord God will come to their defence. After the battle is over, their job is to gather the weapons of war left by the defeated combatants, and turn them into useful firewood—similar to the idea of turning swords into plowshares. Thus they are tasked with cleansing the battlefield, returning the land to productive use.

In the Book of Revelation, they are given one additional role. As the final battle takes place first from Har Megiddo, thereupon developing into a cosmic scale, the role that the people of God seems to be playing is similar to that of cheer leaders—they stand on the sideline and cheer. They give praise and glory to God, proclaiming and singing, *“Hallelujah! For the Lord God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.”* (Revelation 19:6-7)

I love this contemporary praise song, by the title *Agnus Dei*, that captures this spirit of pure praise, if you know it, I like to invite you to join me.

Alleluia Alleluia, For our Lord God Almighty reigns
Alleluia Alleluia, For our Lord God Almighty reigns
Alleluia Alleluia, Holy Holy
Are You Lord God Almighty
Worthy is the Lamb, Worthy is the Lamb
You are Holy, Holy
Are You Lord God Almighty
Worthy is the Lamb, Worthy is the Lamb. Amen!

That is the true lesson **on the mountain of Megiddo**. It is also captured by this simple and well-known hymn ‘Be Still and Know’. Join me if you know it.

Be still and know that I am God
Be still and know that I am God
Be still and know that I am God

I am the Lord that healeth thee
I am the Lord that healeth thee
I am the Lord that healeth thee

In thee, O Lord, I put my trust
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust

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