

Sermon: A Better Word

(Preached at St. Giles Presbyterian Church, July 3, 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.

We have journeyed far and wide. For the past 6 weeks, we have visited a number of mountains of Israel, or more specifically, mountains that have played significant parts in the faith life of the people of God.

We started at Mount Moria, where the faith of Abraham was tested, to see if he would hold anything back from God. He passed the test by his willingness to sacrifice even his own son Isaac. We learn not only that Abraham is indeed worthy to be called the father of faith, but we learn also that ultimately, God provides.

At the burning bush of Mount Horeb, we saw Moses first called by God to return to Egypt, to deliver God's people from slavery. We learn a lesson in obedience, in answering God's call, but more importantly, we learn that God's will shall be done.

At the foothill of Sinai, we witnessed the receiving of the Ten Commandments through Moses. Through that ugly episode of the golden calf, we learn to wait upon the Lord, and not to set oneself above God.

At Mount Jerusalem, the mountain of God, we saw Israel built a magnificent and holy edifice, that is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord! And how a false theology misled the people of God to trust in that temple, instead of trusting in the Lord. We learn that no earthly structure, product of our collective hands could ever contain or control the Holy God of Israel. Our only rightful posture before this Holy God is that of humility—to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

At the hill of Samaria, along with the twin peaks of Ebal and Gerizim, we saw how the divided kingdom of the northern Israel tried and failed terribly to tailor-make a twisted religion to suit their own political agenda. We learn that God is Spirit, we could never re-create God in our image. Through a simple theological dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we learn also to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth.

Last week, I guided you to Mount Megiddo, the site of a battle that is yet to come. We learn that in this future battle between good and evil, the Lord God Almighty, God of Hosts, God of the Angel Army is firmly in control.

It kind of like a rigged contest where the outcome is never in doubt, good shall triumph over evil, and the people of God could only give praise and stand in awe.

And now, today, as we come to the final chapter of this 7-parts sermon series, we find ourselves at Jerusalem again, also known as Mount Zion, the mountain of the Lord. In the vision of the Prophet Isaiah (2:1-5), he foresaw in days to come that Jerusalem, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raise above all hills. People and nations will stream to it, seeking to be taught the ways of the Lord, so they may walk in his paths.

Isaiah prophesied at a time when the first temple of Jerusalem was still standing. His vision makes no distinction between the earthly Jerusalem and eschatological Mount Zion, as he could not have imagined a possibility that the city of Jerusalem and the temple within could one day be no more.

That possibility did become a reality in the time of Prophet Ezekiel. Last week, I spoke about a series of visions that Ezekiel had concerning the end time. The focus last week was chapter 38-39, the vision of a final battle, triggered by a leader from the north, Gog from the land of Magog. What follows after that battle is another vision, recorded in chapter 40 to 48, providing detailed specifications of a newly constructed temple, built on top of an unspecified 'very high mountain' in the land of Israel. It should be stressed in that vision, the prophet did not see a blueprint, he saw an actual structure. He was given a tour of the newly constructed temple by a guide holding a measuring rod, who took pain to measure every corner of the temple, thus giving the prophet (and of course readers of these chapters) a workable blueprint for future construction.

However, no one in history has ever attempted to build that temple according to the given specification. Quite frankly, it would be impossible to do so on top of Mount Jerusalem—the overall size of the temple compound is so immense that it simply could not fit on top of Jerusalem.

Let me try to describe this difficulty by comparing to a familiar size of a Canadian football field. In the time of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the presence of God with the people of Israel is symbolized by the tabernacle, literally a large tent. The court of the tabernacle is about 1/3 a football field. The first temple built by Solomon is about 1/2 of a football field, not much bigger than the tabernacle. The second temple built by the returnees in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah was vastly expanded by Herod

the Great. In order to do so, Herod had to flatten out the base of the temple mount and build a great supporting wall with giant rocks and boulders along the western face. Though the second temple is no longer in existence now, the engineer feat of Herod in building that base is still visible today. The total size of the expanded second temple is about one and a half football fields.

What then is the size of Ezekiel's vision of a new temple? Well, how about 6 football fields. Even if one would raze the entire city of Jerusalem, it still would not fit. Reading these visions of Ezekiel, one starts to get a sense that the temple and the city the prophet saw is really out of this earth.

I should note these visions Ezekiel have given rabbis of Israel no end of trouble. They detailed not just physical dimensions of the temple, but cultic practices that are sometime similar, yet other times distinctly different than that of Judaism. If these visions were indeed carried out precisely and literally, Judaism in the time of Jesus would've looked and felt quite different than what we read in the New Testament.

The vision of out-of-this-world temple and the city that supports it would find a new expression in the vision of St. John in the book of Revelation. While exiled to the island of Patmos in about 90 AD, Apostle John wrote down a series of visions of the Apocalypse, future events of unimaginable terror culminating in the new heaven and new earth, of unimaginable joy. In chapter 21:2, John also describes seeing "*the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*"

John went into great details describing this new Jerusalem, yet he saw in verse 22 "*no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*" It would appear that in this new world order, the temple which symbolizes the presence of God is no longer needed, because the tabernacle of God is among mortals. God will dwell with us, and we will be God's people. In this heavenly Jerusalem, God will wipe away all tears, as mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Death will be no more, as the Lord is making all things new. Hallelujah! Isn't that simply amazing.

As our journey winds down, allow me to conclude this 7-parts sermon series of the mountains of Israel with this passage in Hebrews 12. I think the author of Hebrews is really good at tying major themes in the Old Testament and the New Testament, together in a cohesive whole. Listen to

his passionate exhortation: “*You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them....But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks **a better word** than the blood of Abel.*” (Hebrew 12:18-24)

The blood of Abel, being the first murdered victim, shouts from the ground for vengeance and justice. Yet the sprinkled blood of Christ, proclaim to us plainly from the cross, for the message of shalom, of forgiveness, of reconciliation and eternal salvation. It indeed is **a better word**.

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