

Jerusalem, O Jerusalem

Sermon Topic: Prophets – Micah

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

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Readings: Psalm 122, Micah 2, Luke 19:41-48, Revelation 21: 9-27

If there is one city in the world that has spelt trouble from age immemorial it is Jerusalem. It is a city no less troublesome today than it was in Jesus time or in the days prior to this throughout the Old Testament period. The prophet Micah a contemporary of Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. highlighted more than any other, the abominations and desolations that marred the face of Jerusalem in his time. Practices there that he would denounce prefaced the inevitable judgement of God upon His people. God is loving and patient and kind, all-suffering beyond human imagining. But He is also fair, faithful and holy. God allows things to go on because He has allowed the freedom of human will, for a period known only to Himself. God also chose Jerusalem to be the seat of His Holiness on earth, not Rome or Constantinople or Samaria, or Moscow or Washington or anywhere else. God chose Jerusalem. Successive ages have seen the rise and fall and rise and fall of Jerusalem and it will eventually rise to heights, physically and spiritually that will shame the past forever. It should not surprise us then that Jerusalem has a special place in God's plan and it is one we should be aware of. It is a city that is surprisingly small when you walk around it in comparison to the weight it has carried and will carry in human history. This morning we will consider, through the eyes of Micah and others, the city of Jerusalem and why it is important to us today and why so many world powers continue to fight over it even now.

The book of Micah begins with a dire prophecy for both Israel and Judah; the two kingdoms that made up the Jewish state around 700 BC. The Lord has decided to bring judgement on the two states because of the increasing corruption in society and into the very holiest of places. The Lord's patience with them for this season had reached its end. Chapter 2, as we heard in the readings, outlines God's charge against the people. People lie in bed at night plotting evil and during the day they carry it out because they have the power to do so. Now when we say "evil" you might imagine all sorts of horrendous murderous, violent and scandalous events. In fact, the things mentioned: taking fields and houses, defrauding people of inheritances and so forth have become normal business practice. It has become a culture of deceit and deception and this is taken as normal. If we were to take a modern parallel: we might wonder what the Lord feels about society today where people believe they can lie to another person's face boldly and blandly without consequence, as if it were completely normal. Lies and mis-information have become the norm, even at the highest levels of power in the world today. We might have a fair idea how the Lord feels about that. Well, in Israel and Judah it had reached the point where the religious processes were also corrupted to their core. The religious institution supported the corruption and spoke what the people wanted to hear. The prophets spoke lies they had made up themselves, they spoke peace where there was no peace and they divined fortunes for payment like the worst of the occult practitioners. The leaders of the people led to their own benefit

economically stripping and misusing the people. The judges delivered justice by the value of the bribes they were offered. From top to toe the society was corrupt.

In the midst of this sorrow state and the prediction of the punishment God is to bring upon the people Micah prophesies three significant prophecies. The first prophecy was about the physical destination of Israel and Judah with all its consequence for the people, the second was about the Messiah to come and the third was about the restoration of Jerusalem.

Regarding Samaria, the capital of the northern Kingdom of Israel, Micah paraded through the streets stripped naked, capturing the people's attention, proclaiming the place would be destroyed. The region he proclaimed would be similarly stripped bare, all the idols would be broken, the Temple and all its fitting burned, the stones of the buildings scattered through the fields. In 734-732BC the Assyrian King, Tiglath-Pileser III, led a military campaign against the Northern Kingdom and did just as was prophesied. But 721BC the entire Northern Kingdom, including Damascus and Samaria was completely overrun and conquered by the Assyrians. The Southern Kingdom of Judah followed in a second campaign by the Assyrian King Sennacherib in 701 although famously Jerusalem itself would at that stage be spared. However, as the people, after a brief hiatus, still continued to be disobedient to God Jerusalem itself would be allowed to fall to the Babylonians in 586BC under Nebuchadnezzar. The people exiled, the Temple destroyed and burned. This first prophecy was fulfilled to the letter.

In the midst of impending calamity, God always provides solid rays of hope for those who trust in Him. In this case it came in the shape of a prophecy about the Messiah who was to come. The faithful looked to the coming Messiah to, quite literally, be their Saviour. We read in Micah chapter 5 that he prophesied that *"... you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting."* In other words, Jesus would be born in the small provincial town of Bethlehem. Not in either of the capitals or any other place of significance but in Bethlehem. Where you are born, your place or situation is not an obstacle to the Lord blessing your life and you being useful to His mission! Of course, we know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, so this prophecy too has been fulfilled to the letter. The Messiah would begin the fulfilment of all that is promised about Him.

Finally, we come to Jerusalem. Around 2082BC in Genesis 22, Abraham, in faithful obedience, took his son to Mt Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice to God. Abraham was willing to sacrifice everything, even the son of his old age so dear to his heart, to God trusting God would resurrect his son. God appreciated Abraham's faithfulness and incidentally, Abraham learned that human sacrifice of this nature was not what God wanted for His people. A sacrificial life yes, not a life sacrificed by another, if you see the distinction. This mountain top of faith was to become famous as Abraham named it *"The Place Where God Will Be Seen"* (Genesis 22:14). Almost 1000 years later in 1052 BC David, having been crowned king returned to

Jerusalem to conquer it and make it the capital of his kingdom. Over thirty-three years David built Jerusalem from a small town to a great city and a place fit to bring the Ark of the Covenant. Yet it would not be David who would build that Temple there. God forbade David to do so because of the “blood on his hands” but would instead leave the task to Solomon. David put everything in place for the Temple to be built but, as instructed, left it to his son to do. After Solomon’s death the kingdom, as we heard, was divided into two kingdoms Judah in the South and Israel in the North. The capital of Judah was Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, Samaria. A falling away of faith led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586BE as we heard and the slaughter or exiling of the people to Babylon. The Persian leader Cyrus let a portion of the people return in 539 BC to resettle the land and start the rebuilt of the Temple. In 445BC Nehemiah returned from Babylon to rebuild the city, its walls and Temple. Little is known until the Hellenist period when Alexander the Great captured Israel for the Greeks. The Greeks under Emperor Antiochus were eventually thrown out by a Jewish militant rebellion led by Judas Maccabeus in 160CE. The Roman Emperor Pompey captured Israel and Jerusalem itself in 63CE establishing Israel as a Roman province. In 37BC they named Herod as King of Judea to rule on their behalf. This city of Jerusalem, promised to be God’s Holy mountain has been fought over ever since.

Jesus visited Jerusalem multiple times. How many as a child we don’t know but as many as four times during His three ministry years. The gospels record one particularly revealing account, that of Jesus crying over Jerusalem. In Luke 19:41ff we heard that on Palm Sunday as Jesus was warmly greeted by the crowds as He rode the donkey up the road to Jerusalem He wept. He wept for Jerusalem. Jesus said, ***“If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”*** Jesus knew exactly what was coming for Jerusalem, its complete and utter destruction under the Roman generals Titius and Vespasian. Even the Temple was torn down stone from stone as they searched for molten gold that had run between the stones as the Temple burned. The stones were cast from the Temple mound. Historian Josephus speaks of the blood of the people that flowed like rivers from the Jerusalem hill when as many as one million people were slaughtered there. When Jesus church was established Jerusalem was its home, the place where the disciples were to stay until Pentecost and there the Holy Spirit came upon them. Even when the church was forcibly dispersed in the first Christian Diaspora the early church maintained a presence in the city, even at great personal cost.

But Micah’s third prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. We have seen how the first two prophecies have been so closely fulfilled so we can have confidence that the final prophecy will be fulfilled as well, and maybe sooner than some think. The final prophecy points us to the restoration of Jerusalem to the fulness of its glory – one far greater than anything that has gone before. In Micah 4 we are told that the

Temple will be restored in Jerusalem and after the initial destruction of the End of Days. The mountain itself will be raised up and the Temple restored. All the peoples of the world will stream to the city. This appears to be the start of the Messianic Age, the Millennial Kingdom, that is the Kingdom ruled by Jesus for a thousand years on earth. It will be a place of refuge, rest and restoration for all those who call on the Name of the Lord.

The body of believers is called, in Psalm 122, to ***“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, Prosperity within your palaces. For the sake of my brethren and companions, I will now say, “Peace be within you.” Because of the house of the Lord our God I will seek your good.”***

And the people said, **Amen**