

Preacher: R. Tom Fralin, presenting sermon by Pastor Tim

Scripture: Zechariah 8:3-8

Jerusalem is so important to the Jewish People. It is important to them today and it has been for a very long time. It was the place where the mighty King David established his throne. It is the place where David's son Solomon constructed the first Jewish Temple to worship the one true God. It was the final city to fall before the Babylonians banished the people from the land. It is a place of memory, a place of legend, a home.

It wasn't, however, just the iconic home for the great Kings of Israel—it was also the home of God. As you've been reading along, you've probably heard the prophets and historians referring to the beloved Mt. Zion or maybe just Zion. You see, Jerusalem sat on two hills. One of the Hills, Mt Zion, is where the temple was constructed. Even today, the Temple Mount is lifted high above the rest of the city. When the Psalmist speaks of going up to Jerusalem, this is what they're talking about. You must ascend Mt. Zion to visit the Lord's Temple, his home.

But what makes the temple a home? Christians know that our churches are not the homes of God. We all learned as kids when someone would say a bad word in church or do anything they weren't supposed to—one of the kids would say, "You can't do/say that in church." To which some smart kid or a nearby adult would remind us that we shouldn't say or do that anywhere. God isn't just here—he's everywhere. But for the Jews, God was definitely in that Temple. Remember the evolution of the Temple, however. It started off as a Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was a complex tent that the Israelites carried with them through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. The Tabernacle was, according to their theology, the place of residence for God while they journeyed. It was also the place where Moses could communicate with God. So, when the Israelites are able to build a Temple under King Solomon, this could be a more permanent residence for God to dwell among the people.

This Temple, however, was destroyed by the Babylonians during their occupation and the exile. You can imagine the theological, religious, and emotional impact this had on the people of Judah. The home of God was destroyed. This sent messages through the people like "Maybe our God is not the one true God, the strongest and mightiest God" or "God has abandoned us and left us because his home is gone." What happens to their faith when they no longer have the presence of God with them? For some, it withers; but for others, faith is reinvented or reformed.

With the people scattered into exile across the Babylonian Empire, what good was it to have God's residence all the way back in Jerusalem? God couldn't be living alone in Jerusalem while his people were elsewhere. So, I choose to believe that with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, God, in some ways, is free to dwell with the people wherever they are. God is unbound by walls and travels alongside his people in Ninevah in Babylon and Cairo in Egypt. God goes with God's people. God goes with us even into exile, even when we've wandered far from the preferred path of righteousness. God goes with us and doesn't just wait for us to come back.

And because God goes with Israel and Judah into exile, faith changes. Scholars say that it is during the exile that we see a shift in the religious expression of the Jews. Their faith moves from a focus on the temple cult practices—a religion focused on sacrifice and pilgrimage—to a faith focused on the study of scriptures—the Torah, specifically. While the Jews living in exile did not have access to a temple, they did have access to scriptures, their scrolls of Torah. Thus, a new age of faith emerged which scholars call Rabbinic Judaism. This age was defined by the role of the Rabbi instead of a Priest. While Priests were concerned mostly with temple practice,

Rabbis are concerned mostly with the interpretation of Scripture and its impact on our living. We see both of these movements continuing to play out during the time of Jesus when the Pharisees and Sadducees are at odds. The Pharisees were focusing their attention on the interpretation of scripture and the Sadducees focused on the new temple in Jerusalem.

Christian Theology finds a closer kinship with this Rabbinic Judaism which is, of course, the only expression of Judaism today since there is no Jewish temple nor sacrificial system. Like these Rabbinic Jews emerging in exile, we are also people of the book, people of the word, people interpreting scripture together.

This evolution of faith was well underway when Zechariah delivered his prophecy. But Zechariah's prophesy was not one that was satisfied by the new Rabbinic style of Judaism. Zechariah longed for a day when the Lord would come home—come to Jerusalem, home to Mt Zion, home to the temple of the Lord where God could reside with the people. In verse 3, Zechariah proclaims on behalf of God, "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain." God's intention is to return to Mt. Zion with his people nearby.

This has led many contemporary Jews and Christians to name themselves as Zionists or Christian Zionists. Today, Zionism is the belief that the Jewish people must control the Holy Land and Jerusalem because when they do, it may spur on the return of the Messiah.

I'm not sure that this is the truest way to interpret such prophecy. Zionism doesn't account for the good Jewish reform that was brought about with Rabbinic Judaism. We need not be so focused on Jerusalem anymore. In fact, for us as Christians, we are to go out as ambassadors to the entire world. We have a message for all the people, Jew and Gentile. I believe that Zechariah's call for the Lord and his people to come home to Jerusalem was more of a metaphor than it was the continuance of God's preference for the Temple in Jerusalem.

The purpose of the prophet's witness to us is that God desires to create a home with us. God desires to reside alongside us. God desires to be the source of our greatest joy. Rather than taking up residence in some temple or some church, God wants to take up residence in you.

What really is your home? For me, it isn't the place I live, but it's also being with my family who are scattered in houses all along Interstate 81. To be home is to be with them.

What does it really mean for the Lord to come home? The Lord's understanding of home is to be with and among his family. And God's family is so big now, we aren't going to fit in the city of Jerusalem or the land of Israel. We are scattered all across the globe, but that doesn't mean we aren't centered on God. May the calls of the prophet propel us and the Lord to create a home, a place where elders rest and children play, and may the Lord be in the midst of it all.