

“Mount Zion and Capitol Hill” [Full Version]

Psalm 48

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: July 5, 2009 – Independence Sunday

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden Copyright: 2009, Ivan Peden
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What is Mount Zion? Specifically, “Mount Zion” is the name of one of the hills of Jerusalem ... the “Capitol Hill” of biblical Israel. It was the site first conquered by King David. However, “Mount Zion” often refers to the entire city of Jerusalem, just as we sometimes mean the city of Washington, D.C. when we say “Capitol Hill.” In Psalm 48 “Mount Zion” is a reference to Jerusalem and, even more specifically, to the Temple in Jerusalem. It therefore came to signify the dwelling place of Yahweh.

What’s your favorite city in the world? I have four: Charleston, SC, Cape Town, South Africa, Princeton, NJ, and Lucerne, Switzerland! Jerusalem is more than the psalmist’s favorite city. It is much more than saying, “I love Jerusalem,” like other people say, “I love London,” or “I love Paris,” or “I love New York.” The psalmist loves Jerusalem inasmuch as he believes it to be the city of God. “Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised *in the city of our God*,” he exclaims in Psalm 48, verse 1.

This is a victory psalm. The writer makes it clear that the city of God had been under assault from the enemy. The psalmist wants the reader and singer to understand that it was the presence of God that brought victory against the enemy – the very presence of God in the city that makes it so secure. God makes Jerusalem a beautiful city. God makes Mount Zion, God’s holy mountain, the joy of the whole earth. Clearly, in the psalmist’s mind, God is in control of this city.

Contrast this with Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. While Mount Zion was the seat of a theocracy where God was enthroned in the Temple and from where God ruled God’s kingdom that reached to the ends of the earth, Capitol Hill is the seat of the greatest democracy in the world and home to the Senate and Congress of the United States of America. It is a monument to the ideal of a “government by the people, of the people, and for the people.” It is the place where an elected President and officials are

in control of both the internal and external policies of America. Indirectly and ideally, the American people are in control of Washington D.C. through their votes in the ballot boxes.

We do not have a theocracy in America. We cannot have a theocracy. It would be inappropriate. However, a perfectly legitimate, indeed, a most significant question to ask is: Where is God on Capitol Hill? And a second question follows: Is Washington D.C. God's city? People of Old Testament times were somewhat limited in their thinking about God. They tended to confine or domesticate God by locating God's special presence in the Temple on Mount Zion. However, there are hints – in this psalm and elsewhere in the Old Testament – that they were beginning to understand God's rule as potentially universal.

One of the many courses in biblical theology at any reputable seminary is called hermeneutics. It means taking an original written biblical text and reflecting on its contemporary message or implications in a given time and place in history. In the work of hermeneutics we say we are contextualizing the biblical texts. In order to make it relevant to our context we need to do this with Psalm 48. We need to interpret and apply the psalm to our twenty-first century setting in America.

Psalm 48 intersects the story of America and the stories of our lives on this Sunday one day after our nation's annual celebration of liberty and patriotism, nearly eight years after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the involvement of America in the war in Afghanistan, over six years after the invasion by American and allied forces of Iraq, and nine months after a critical phase of an economic crisis that still leaves us wondering if we will survive economically.

I imagine that you are beginning to feel, like me, that the American public in recent days has become not a little confused about all these events over the past 8 years and the many and varied statements issued from Capitol Hill.

The psalm intersects our context at a time when the official number of American troops killed in Iraq since the start of the war is over 4,300 and the number of casualties

of US troops is over 31,000; when in Afghanistan the most recent data I could find is 682 deaths and 2,046 casualties of American troops; and when in both places the number of civilians killed and wounded is much, much greater.

On the other hand, and on a positive note, the psalm intersects our national situation when the total amount given by Americans to charitable causes in 2008 was \$307.7 billion; when there has been an encouraging decline in US deaths from coronary heart disease in the past two decades, attributable to a reduction in major risk factors and effective treatment; when the total graduate enrolments were up 3% in September 2008 compared to September 2007; and when an FBI report released on June 1, 2009 informs us that “law enforcement agencies throughout the Nation reported a decrease of 2.5 percent in the number of violent crimes brought to their attention in 2008 when compared to figures reported for 2007.” Psalm 48 intersects our context as the struggle between good and evil, hope and despair, success and failure continues.

To be faithful to the text we need to remember that Psalm 48 is a victory psalm that proclaims God’s triumphs over evil. I repeat my questions: Where is God on Capitol Hill? Is Washington D.C. God’s city, as Jerusalem was perceived to be God’s city?

In our country where the policy of the separation of church and state is firmly upheld – and, some people perhaps justifiably argue, where it is has been taken to extremes – it is not so easy to answer the questions I have just posed. “Mount Zion,” unlike “Capitol Hill,” is a powerful symbol of salvation in the Old Testament. It embodies claims about divine providence, about God’s presence with God’s people, and about the need for the whole world to recognize God’s activity. *CAN BE OMITTED.

*[“Mount Zion” is also a dangerous symbol because of its concrete claims about God and country. The danger of the symbol is evident in the conclusion to the psalm: *Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, consider well its ramparts, go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever.*

Let me attempt to explain: If you were a worshiper in ancient Israel and you sang Psalm 48 while you walked around Jerusalem and measured the thickness of its walls and counted its many defensive towers, after a while it would be difficult to separate divine providence from the fortress itself. When this fusion happens, Zion becomes idolatrous and nationalistic, in the attempt to defend holy turf by violent means against any other kind of group. Pointing to stone structures, the psalmist declares: *This is our God!* In my opinion, this is a serious limitation of Old Testament theology, but – if we are not careful – this limitation may not be so far removed from our perception of God in these times. It was a mistake to equate God’s presence with the walls of Jerusalem. Likewise, it would be a mistake to equate God’s presence with the stone, bricks, and mortar of Washington D.C.]

The reality of Mount Zion must be preached: God rules, God’s rule is universal, and God provides security for all God’s people by dwelling with them ... by being Emmanuel, “God with us.” That truth must be faithfully proclaimed. However, the reality of Mount Zion in relation to Capitol Hill in our American context must be located in the church – among God’s people wherever they are – and not in any structures, as imposing as they may be.

Where is God on Capitol Hill? We had the answer when as children we used to clasp our hands with our fingers pointed inward and say: “Here is the church; here is the steeple; open the doors and see all the people!” Or, as the contemporary hymn puts it: “The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people ... *I am the church! You are the church! We are the church together! All who follow Jesus, all around the world! Yes, we’re the church together!*”

Where is God? As the evangelist, John, so eloquently wrote in the prologue to his gospel: “The Word became flesh and dwelt ... that is, tabernacled ... that is, made a dwelling place among all people.” God, the Divine Word, in the person of Jesus the Christ came to an estranged world ... identified with a wayward humankind ... and

brought the gift of eternal life to all who recognize God's universal reign and through repentance and faith embrace God's plan of salvation in Christ for the whole world.

Where is God? God is among God's people worshiping in the great National Cathedral in Washington D.C. as much as God is among God's people worshiping in "the little brown church in the vale." God is there among the people David Hiatt has been called to serve in a rural two-point Charge in Gaston County. God is there at First Church in Morganton where Todd McCullough begins his ministry as an associate today. God is among us here at Memorial Church in Thomasville.

Is Washington D.C. God's city? The answer is "yes, inasmuch as the Christian church is established in our political capital." Is Thomasville God's city? Yes. Is Baghdad God's city? Yes. Are Charleston, Cape Town, Princeton and Lucerne God's cities? Are London, Paris and New York God's cities? We must answer a resounding "yes!" Wherever God's people are to be found and the gospel is faithfully embraced ... there is Zion ... there is the city of God. The shortcoming of Old Testament theology – the domestication of God and location of God in one place, namely, the Temple – has been eclipsed with the coming of Jesus Christ. The true light has come into the world and has shone on *all* people. This light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it. *CAN BE OMITTED.

*[Let us never underestimate the shedding abroad of the light of Christ ... the witnessing power ... the proclamation ... that takes place because we are God's people scattered throughout the length and breadth of this great land. We are a peaceful influence that counters the force of violence, restrains people who are drifting, heartens people who are despairing, and irritates those who are bent on doing evil. As Jesus said, "You are light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden."]

On this Independence Sunday, we ask God for the light of Jesus Christ to shine forth from Capitol Hill – even from within the Senate and Congress where godly people, praying people, ethical people ... people who put God first ... people who recognize that we are "One nation under God" ... bring God's light to the whole assembly ...

bring God's light to bear upon those places of darkness in our society ... bring God's light by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.

Let us ask God that we here at Memorial Church may continue to faithfully reflect the light of God's presence in God's city, Thomasville, North Carolina. Let our awareness be renewed that we, along with all God's people, are the holy habitation of God's holy presence, of God's precious love for all humankind, and of God's extravagant gift of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you have heard the story about the old monastery that was down to just three monks. If so, I don't apologize if you have to hear it again. It is a story with a profound lesson. Years had passed since anyone joined the ranks of the monks in the monastery. Its time had passed and these three monks figured they would be the last. The abbot in charge shared his sadness with a friend, the neighboring rabbi. The rabbi looked surprised. "Oh no," he said. "Your Order will not die. Your monastery will not close. I have had a revelation that the Messiah is among you. So, no, you will not close."

The Abbot returned to the other monks scratching his head, and told his two colleagues. They were all astonished. And suddenly, they began to see each other in an entirely new light. They began to take care of each other as never before, as if they were taking care of the Messiah. They listened to each other as they had never listened before, as if they were listening to the Messiah. They blessed one another as they had never blessed one another before, as if they were blessing the Messiah. Visitors to the monastery noticed the quality of the monks care for one another. It was beautiful! And it was contagious. People wanted to experience what they experienced. People wanted to join, and when they did, they were told the secret: "Sh-h-h-h-h! The Messiah is here among us!" And each met the Messiah in the other until all were drawn close in the love of God.

Let us look closely at one another in this sacred place today. In *all* God's people, irrespective of nationality, language, ethnicity, status, position, age, gender ... whether

clergy or laity, employed or unemployed ... in *all* ...let us see the Messiah, the Christ figure, among us. Let us recognize that we *are Zion* ... that God in Christ *has taken up residence here* just as God's holy habitation is to be found wherever two or three are gathered in the Lord's name.

And, my brothers and sisters in Christ, when others wonder what is different about us, we will let them in on the secret. "Sh-h-h-h-h! The Messiah is here among us."

In then name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.