

“But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

Thank you for joining us as we continue our midweek Advent series on talking about the four major prophets and the visions of which they prophesied. As we move from left to right on the stained glass windows above, we also move forward in history. Isaiah would not live to see the destruction of Jerusalem. Jeremiah would prophesy during the destruction of Jerusalem and would be carted off to Egypt by Jews fleeing the destruction.

Even though many of the prophecies deal with Judah, Ezekiel prophecies from Babylon. Likely he was carried away into Babylon during the reign of Jehoiachin when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took 10,000 captives. This was about ten years before Jerusalem was destroyed. Ezekiel lived during the time of the destruction of Jerusalem without actually seeing the temple destroyed.

We learn that in addition to being a prophet, Ezekiel was a priest. However, to be a priest without a temple is like being a sailor without a boat or a teacher without a class. Ezekiel’s opening vision is of angels and of God Himself. The Lord sends Ezekiel to preach to Israel, a rebellious people. The Book of Ezekiel gives us many images of comfort to show us the power of God who reigns even when God’s people are exiles in the strange land of Babylon.

In this way it is similar to the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, but Ezekiel’s book of prophecy is very different and at times hard to understand. This is reflected in our lectionary system. Ezekiel is about the same number of verses in length as the book of Isaiah, but we hear the book of Isaiah read more than six times more than the book of Ezekiel throughout our three-year lectionary cycle.

Sections of Ezekiel describe Israel’s unfaithfulness in shocking, graphic detail. Ezekiel is instructed to enact odd object lessons: eating a scroll, laying on his side for 390 days, and cooking food over a manure fire. The Church Father Jerome said that Rabbis taught Jews that they shouldn’t read the first and final chapters of Ezekiel until they were thirty years old. The first chapter have a shocking vision of God and His angels. The last chapters have an extended vision of a new, rebuilt temple.

The book of Ezekiel is something we’re going to wrestle with this evening. Despite the many warnings in the first half of the book, there are many promises of hope and comfort. Ezekiel, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, had a better country in mind as he sat with his fellow Jews in Babylon. Specifically, Ezekiel had in mind a better temple.

Our symbol for Ezekiel is a closed gate which references his imprisonment. There is no reference in the book of Ezekiel to his imprisonment. Likewise, I was unable to find even a tradition or a guess as to how Ezekiel died.

But gates do segue well into our text for tonight. Our Psalm reads, **“Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.”** I chose the Gospel reading for the Triumphal Entry. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, He entered from the East, from the Mount of Olives.

To this day, there is a gate on the East side of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem called the Golden Gate. Many believe the Messiah will come through this gate. This gate has been since been sealed to prevent that from happening, but for those of us who know who the true Messiah is, that is trying to shut the stable down after the horse has bolted.

We read, **“Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory.”** What’s more, in the next chapter, **“And the LORD said to me, “This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered by it. Therefore it shall remain shut.”** The description seems to coincide with the Golden Gate in Jerusalem.

Indeed, we understand that Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the glory of the God of Israel and He is the exact imprint of God’s nature. This Advent, we await for the arrival of Jesus as He is the king of the new Kingdom, and He brings in a new way to worship God in spirit and truth.

His birth at Christmas has as its goal the entry into Jerusalem. He said of His body, **“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”** The temple he was talking about is not the building, but His body as He gave His body up to be sacrificed and be raised up for our salvation.

Taking a step back, Ezekiel was prophesying of a better temple in Ezekiel 40–48. Perhaps you could say of Ezekiel you can take the priest out of the temple, but you can’t take the temple out of the priest. In other words, the Lord was showing Ezekiel a picture of redemption and restoration in terms he could understand: a restored place to worship in a restored Israel.

How we as Christians interpret this text has been a difficult, to say the least. Horace Hummel, wrote in his Ezekiel commentary, “From almost any perspective these chapters are among the most formidable and challenging in the entire Bible.” The dimensions described of this heavenly temple don’t match the measurements of the first temple or of the second temple. John in the book of Revelation writes, **“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.”** Strictly speaking, there isn’t going to be a temple building in the Heavenly Jerusalem, so what could Ezekiel possibly have in mind here?

As mentioned above, we can see glimpses of this prophecy fulfilled as Jesus, the glory of the Lord, enters the temple from the East gate as we see in the Palm Sunday procession. We can even see coincidences in history of that same gate

being blocked off, but what of the rest of Ezekiel 40–48 with its oddly specific measurements and dimensions of a temple that was never built? Perhaps there's a reason this isn't in our lectionary and this is the first time you've heard section of Scripture.

As we wrap up an unusual sermon on an unusual section of an unusual book of the Bible, what can we walk away with? First, I think it's important to highlight that all the Bible is inspired and for our edification, even the parts that we don't fully understand. Just because Ezekiel 40–48 doesn't make a whole lot of sense to us now doesn't mean it won't ever make sense to us.

Second, all Scripture speaks of Christ. As we consider the situation of Ezekiel and his fellow Hebrews, we understand that they dreamt of a restoration of the way things were with a temple at which they could worship. God gave Ezekiel a vision of a temple that was way better than anything He could have imagined, and as we look to a better temple, we see that temple in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of these last chapters of Ezekiel as John tells us in Revelation that the Lamb and the Lord Almighty are the temple at which we are to worship.

For the Jews of that day, to be removed from the temple was to be removed from the presence of God. In Christ, we know that whether you are in Jerusalem, La Crosse, or Outer Space, the Lord God goes with you. Indeed, as you entered into this sanctuary you walked past the verse **“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”** We gather in a space holier than the temple of Jerusalem not because of our architecture but because the Holy Spirit indwells the souls of believers, making what happens in church as we gather around the Word, the Holy Absolution, Holy Baptism, and Holy Communion something that the Lord blesses with His very presence.

Third, as we look at the rich imagery of the temple in Ezekiel as well as the extended metaphors throughout the book of Revelation, we know that these authors, inspired by the Holy Spirit and inerrant in all their words, are writing of something that is too big for words. In this Advent season, may I be forgiven for prematurely quoting the words of a Christmas hymn, “Now Sing We, Now Rejoice” the closing lines cry out, “Oh, that we were there! Oh, that we were there!” In the same vein, we also think of the hymn “Jerusalem the Golden” “We know not, oh, we know not, what joys await us there; the radiancy of glory, The bliss beyond compare!”

We trudge away in this workaday world, but waiting for us is a better country, a better covenant, and a better temple. This is the temple fulfilled ultimately in the heavenly Jerusalem which is to come, yet has been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Let us ever strive forward with the eyes of faith to see just like Ezekiel did, better things promised of us in the future, even as we await Jesus' Advent on this Christmas.