

**2.5.23 – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany**  
**“The Holy Mountains of Israel”**  
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

**Micah 4:1-5 (NIV)**

*The Mountain of the Lord*

<sup>1</sup> In the last days  
the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established  
as the highest of the mountains;  
it will be exalted above the hills,  
and peoples will stream to it.  
<sup>2</sup> Many nations will come and say,  
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the temple of the God of Jacob.  
He will teach us his ways,  
so that we may walk in his paths.”  
The law will go out from Zion,  
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
<sup>3</sup> He will judge between many peoples  
and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.  
They will beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation will not take up sword against nation,  
nor will they train for war anymore.  
<sup>4</sup> Everyone will sit under their own vine  
and under their own fig tree,  
and no one will make them afraid,  
for the Lord Almighty has spoken.  
<sup>5</sup> All the nations may walk  
in the name of their gods,  
but we will walk in the name of the Lord  
our God for ever and ever.

**Leader: These are Words of Prophetic Peace. All: Thanks be to God!**

**Ephesians 2:19-22 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

**Leader: These are Words of Spiritual Unity. All: Thanks be to God!**

**Please pray with me:**

Dearest Jesus, thank you for the Scriptures and the pilgrimage made available to your servants. We as the body of Christ are grateful for your Father God, your sacrifice for us, and for the comfort and power of the Holy Spirit. Lord Jesus, we

appreciate your birth, your life, teachings, and courageous steps toward the cross, knowing that we worship a risen Savior. Be with those who cannot be here today, and please speak through this messenger's testimony. Amen.

---

Thank you church, leadership, and staff for your steadfastness and commitment to worship and activities while I was in Israel. I had perfect peace knowing that you are competent and willing to serve in my absence. Also, let me thank you for your powerful prayers during my pilgrimage. I felt safe and strengthened the whole time. I hope you don't mind if I share a few things with you about my trip, tying it in with our lesson at the end.

As you know, I was able to join 42 other pastors, spouses, parents, and NorthStar staff on this 12-day journey to Israel. It was not a typical tour but was meant to be a Bible Study pilgrimage to challenge and transform us. And it did. The scope was bigger than I realized, so processing this trip will take me a year or two of additional study and reflection. Today I have just a few minutes, so you'll be getting bits and pieces for many months as I weave my experiences into other Scripture studies, especially as we approach Easter and then again, this Christmas. I took hundreds of photos, so we have bulletin covers for a long time!

When I planned to give this talk, I assumed I'd share the footsteps of Jesus and a little Old Testament, itinerary-style (we went here, there, & everywhere); but now after a week home, I feel that I must share more of the context and atmosphere first. I am inexperienced at global travel, so it was good that I went in a group, especially this group of experienced ministers. I do not **speak** Hebrew at all; yes, I took Biblical Hebrew in Seminary, but it was for reading and study, and only one year at that. We were told there was mostly English spoken, but I found it written only on

a few signs, gift shops, and at hotels. Everywhere else was Hebrew or Arabic. We had an excellent guide who spoke English, Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish, and a little French, so we felt very comfortable with him. Reuben Nevo and our driver, Mayer, were amazing. Reuben has his Master's degree from The Hebrew University in Jewish history, and is an official government tour guide for the Ministry of Tourism in Israel. So, our pilgrimage was thorough; it had elements of Bible history (both Old and New Testament), geography, archaeology, sociology, ethics, a little politics, adventure, foodie focus, and culture. It felt like a university course in 10 days! I am not writing their brochure but want to convey that the experiences and information will take months to unravel and comprehend. So, be patient with me as I set the tone today, and over time, slowly unveil God's meaning in each of the sites and experiences I had.

To be frank, the logistics and strenuous walking up and down inhospitable terrain were distracting at first. Israel has a mountainous geography, so it was built on hills and cliffs. My body adapted and I was able to do all but two steep, uphill hikes. Early builders used irregular steps and stones to slow people down so they could pause purposefully to reflect on God or greet members of the community. I could not complain, because we were fed well a Mediterranean, Israeli and Kosher diet with luscious small desserts, and maintained our weight! The fruits, salads, cheeses, olives, nuts, fish, meats, and veggies were delicious; and I had the good fortune of training and sensitizing my palate by Chef Roudaina, our Admin, who generously brought me many samples to try in the weeks before I left. She made sure that I was prepared, so I could help others understand what we were eating. The hotel buffets also had American

options for the timid. I am grateful to her! To continue the cultural snapshot, the accommodations were ideal; the traffic was noisy; some buildings were unfinished, abandoned or vandalized, yet most of the **people** were lovely. Although tourism is crucial to Israel, there were many aggressive and unfriendly people that I observed, as in every country. We felt safe as we travelled around (show the map) from the mid-coast Tel Aviv north to the Sea of Galilee, and then south toward Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, the Judean Desert, and finally Jerusalem itself with stops in between. After nine or ten Palestinians were killed by an Israel Defense special unit seeking known terrorists, two lone wolf shooters on different days killed seven and five Jews exiting synagogues. The leaders of our tour adjusted locations based on security, so we were not in danger, but were somewhat close to the violence and protests. The only thing we noticed, however, was an increased police presence and occasional detour. That sounds a little like DC, right? I appreciated your prayers.

Per our itinerary, we went to archaeology ruins to see how the people lived close to Jesus' time. That has already informed how I read Scripture. The highlights for me were sailing and worshipping on the Sea of Galilee, another worship time with a long reflection time in the Garden of Gethsemane, and visiting Yad Vashem, known as the Museum of Shoah (or like ours, the Holocaust Museum). It was difficult but so important. There are many more adventures to share, like Hezekiah's Tunnel and off-roading in the desert, both of which challenged and affirmed my faith! [you can ask me later!] The networking with other pastors built new friendships that will strengthen us as a church. My trip

is like the huge pomegranates grown in Israel: when you cut it open, it smells wonderful, is colorful, and has many juicy edible seeds (or stories in my case); but you cannot eat it like an apple all at one sitting. More will be revealed from my pomegranate experience in days to come.

The passages for today were chosen before the trip, and I think they appropriately express some of my feelings. The beautiful mountains I saw project a steady God, a persistent Jesus, a comforting Holy Spirit, all protecting valleys of flourishing gardens of fruits and vegetables (irrigated underground from seasonal rains and springs). The mountains in the desert provided and still do provide holy places for purification, a letting go of sin, bitterness, anger, defeat, making room for a living savior, the one we know is in us, a new temple, one that cannot be destroyed. This is Paul's message in Ephesians: we are all citizens of one God, one Savior, and one Holy Spirit, no matter our differences.

Our faith sustains us; the holy mountains like Mount Moriah, Mount Zion, the Mount of Beatitudes, Mount of Precipice, Mount Arbel, Mount Scopus, Mount Hermon, Mount Hebron, Mount Tabor, and others are symbols of Jewish heritage and Christ's neighborhood! Jesus is the cornerstone of all those buildings and peoples, Jews, and Gentiles alike, coming together to be reconciled to the new covenant, with ultimate respect for the covenants before (Abraham, Moses, David). Scripture upon scripture—heroes of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments—attest to our unity, despite religious and cultural conflict. Peace may not be possible today in the Middle East, and the historic temples are crumbling with some restoration; but my message today is that **we** must recover and renew ourselves as the temple, despite our differences,

politics, and opinions. It is this unity of believers in a merciful, loving God that we celebrate in the Lord's Supper today. Let go of any preconceived notions of Israel, Jews, Palestinians, or Americans, and let us go to the Lord in prayerful humility, remembering the stability and foundations of our faith, illustrated by those eternal holy mountains in Israel. Amen. |

**Will you pray with me?** God, creator of all peoples, help us to remember we are yours and to live **not** just for self. May you strengthen our relationship with you through Jesus so we may grow and want to study your word with maps, dictionaries, and other guides. Bring transformation into ourselves and our church and community, as we explore what “divine experiments” will come and what inspiration surfaces from my pilgrimage. We thank you for our speakers and for all we experienced the last several weeks. In Jesus' name, we pray, **Amen**.