

Sermon for Sunday, June 14, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Standing out on the plains
of the valley of Jezreel
just a couple of miles
from the border between Israel and the West Bank
stands a fortified hill.

It was first settled
about nine thousand years ago,
and archaeologists have uncovered
twenty six layers
of settlement
in the fortified city
of Megiddo.

I had the privilege of visiting it in 2011,
walking up an ancient cobbled street and through the city walls
to an enormous complex of buildings.
It stands at the crossroads of four different routes,
and as such
was of strategic importance.
Among the ruins
are traces of stables
that date back to the time of Elijah,
a hundred fifty years or so
after the reign of King Saul, who we heard about in our first reading.
Those stables could hold
almost five hundred horses,
horses that were primarily used in battle.
This was a military stronghold,
that cobbled street
the only access even then,
the walls and cliffs making it relatively easy to defend.
There are huge vats for storing grain
in case of siege,
and a tunnel to a spring-fed pool of water.

But when the Babylonians invaded

in 586 BC,
and took the people of Israel
into exile
the city was abandoned,
and has remained empty ever since,
though major battles have been fought at its base
all the way through
to the twentieth century.

When you travel in the Holy Land
you can't help but notice
the history of warfare
that is embedded there.

Jerusalem itself makes use of the geography of its location
deep valleys supplementing the high walls of the old city,
Hezekiah's tunnel feeding water from the Gihon Spring
on the side of the cliff overlooking the Kidron Valley.
into the pool of Siloam within the city walls.

And of course there is the desert fortress of Masada
an isolated rock plateau overlooking the Dead Sea,
thirty seven acres of storehouses, barracks, an armory, a palace, and cisterns
that could only be reached by one of the three narrow winding paths that lead to fortified
gates.

It was there that Jewish rebels established themselves in the late first century,
withstanding a Roman siege for months
until the Romans built a 375 foot high siege ramp and broke through to the fortress,
only to find that the nine hundred sixty rebels
had committed mass suicide.

But the signs of warfare
don't end with historical sites.

Traveling south from Arad further into the Negev
you pass the Negev Nuclear Research Center at Dimona,
where it is reported
that nuclear weapons have been made.

"May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble,
the Name of the God of Jacob defend you"

is the way our psalm today begins.
And the next three verses follow straight on:

[May the Lord] send you help from his holy place
and strengthen you out of Zion;
[May he] Remember all your offerings
and accept your burnt sacrifice;
[May he] Grant you your heart's desire
and prosper all your plans.

At first glance,
this seems to be a psalm of comfort for those whose lives
are troubled.
It's a kind of blessing:
and the picture of God that it presents
is one of a God
whose greatest desire is to do what we ask.
It's a wonderful blessing,
and one that I suspect
we would all like.

Except - and you knew this was coming -
except that we can't read those first four verses in isolation.
This isn't
some sort of generic psalm.
And it's when we read on,
that we discover what it's really all about.

And the key, I think,
is in verse 7:
Some put their trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we will call upon the Name of the LORD our God.

Horses and chariots,
in biblical times,
horses and chariots
were the tools of war.
It didn't matter
how good your soldiers were,
how true their aim with bow and arrow,

how expert their swordplay.
If you had horses and chariots
and your enemies didn't
you were pretty much
guaranteed to win.
The Holy Land
is in a key strategic location.
It is the connecting point
between Africa and Asia and Europe.
Most of the major trade routes of the ancient world
went through it.
Whoever ruled the land
also ruled those routes
and with them enormous power and wealth.
No wonder it was constantly being fought over,
not just in biblical times
but all through history
and even today.

And horses and chariots were key
in the battles over that land.
That's why
the people of God were so afraid of the Egyptians. Because their armies
were equipped with horses and chariots.
As were the Babylonians
and the Romans,
and pretty much everyone else
who tried to invade
that little strip
of Holy Land.
Nowadays
it's not horses and chariots
but rockets and suicide bombers,
but the effect is the same.

Megiddo, Jerusalem, Masada, Dimona.
The people of God
were often at war.

And in a place so charged with religion,

you couldn't avoid the question
of what it means to have faith
in a time of war.

This psalm,
this psalm
is one response.

- 1 "May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble, *
the Name of the God of Jacob defend you"
- 2 Send you help from his holy place *
and strengthen you out of Zion;
- 3 Remember all your offerings *
and accept your burnt sacrifice;
- 4 Grant you your heart's desire *
and prosper all your plans.
- 5 We will shout for joy at your victory
and triumph in the Name of our God; *
may the LORD grant all your requests.
- 6 Now I know that the LORD gives victory to his anointed; *
he will answer him out of his holy heaven,
with the victorious strength of his right hand.
- 7 Some put their trust in chariots and some in horses, *
but we will call upon the Name of the LORD our God.
- 8 They collapse and fall down, *
but we will arise and stand upright.
- 9 O LORD, give victory to the king *
and answer us when we call.

And in the context of war
the message of the psalm is unambiguous.
Don't put your trust
in military might. Put your trust in God.

Let me say it again.
Don't put your trust
in military might. Put your trust in God.

Can you imagine what hearing that
might have felt like

for the people of God?
People whose defining story
had been escape from the military might of Egypt,
chased across the desert
by the Egyptian army
and rescued only
by the Red Sea?
And people who,
once they arrived in the promised land
had had their homeland invaded
time and time again.
Don't put your trust
in military might. Put your trust in God.

So what does this psalm
say to us today?

In many ways
we are like the people of God in the Holy Land.
This event that defined this country
that won it freedom and independence
was a war,
and wars have continued to define and shape us.

And we have tended to put our trust, if not in chariots and horses,
but in military might
and national security.

Remember our response to the terrorist acts of 9/11?

The Patriot Act

provided some necessary safeguards.

But it also cast a broad shadow over anyone who was an immigrant.

A friend of mine can't rent a u-haul truck without her credit card being automatically cancelled, because she married someone with an Arabic name.

Non citizens could have been arrested at any time and held without charge and without any one being notified.

And of course, our military became involved in wars on foreign soil which have resulted in incredible loss of civilian life, as well as of our own soldiers, and the benefits for peace have been mixed.

Don't put your trust
in military might, says our psalm. Put your trust in God.
And yet at the same time, we know
that the people of God continued
to fight wars,
and the psalm itself
suggests that God may be involved
in their victories.

And then there's Jesus, Jesus who said,
"Pray for your enemies. Do good to those who hate you."

These words of our psalm are profoundly challenging.
They ask us to question
much of which we hold dear.
There are no easy answers - which is why the Christian church has struggled for the last
twenty centuries
about how we should respond in times of war,
and the answers have varied.

But what is clear is this.
All the military might in the world can't save us.
Only God can.

Keep struggling with the questions. Don't be content with easy answers.
And remember, it is indeed God who saves us.