

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First week of Advent: Year C

RCL Readings – Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

ACNA Readings – Zechariah 14:(1-2) 3-9, Psalm 50, 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:25-33

Seasonal Introduction. Advent is the start of a new liturgical year in the Christian calendar. The season doesn't start with the birth of the Messiah but rather with the expectation of God fulfilling His promises. Advent isn't just about the first coming of Jesus as God incarnate on earth but also His promise to return. As we approach Christmas, we should know that since God fulfilled His promises to Israel (for Jesus the Messiah came to redeem all those who listen to His voice) surely He will also fulfill His promise that He will return to judge both the living and the dead—some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Common Theme. Preaching about the Day of the Lord can be difficult in that some people completely ignore the whole subject while others can be overly obsessed with the apocalypse. Books have been written, movies made, as well as flow charts listing all the prophecies of the Bible. They are so often plucked out of context and blended together to tell us when the Messiah will come. Unfortunately, we have a long history of false predictions about the return of Jesus that can lead people to have a jaded view of the end times. Our readings this week encourage us to live a lifestyle of expectation, both towards judgment and the coming return of Jesus.

Hebraic Context. The word to judge in Hebrew is *לִישׁוֹף*/*lish'phot*. It means to judge in the sense of law but it can also mean to rule in the sense of government. In the Scriptures, to judge often implies both. God, as the author and divine creator, not only of the world but the standard of what is good and acceptable and what is evil, is the one who judges the world—both throughout history and at the end of time. Therefore, God's kingship implies a present governmental ruling, which may include various legal judgments, and a future final judgment where all the wrongs are made right and evil is punished and done away with.

Abraham acknowledged God as the ultimate judge when he was arguing over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Genesis 18:25) The Psalms also declared that God is the judge of the world, "From the heavens you uttered judgment; the earth feared and was still, when God arose to establish judgment, to save all the humble of the earth."¹

¹ Psalm 76:8, see also Psalm 50:6, 58:11, 75:7; Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3

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God has consistently worked with and through His creation.² But when examining the text closely, we find evidence that God isn't the only agent dispensing His own judgment. Isaiah notes that God appointed the Messiah as a regent to rule and judge as His representative on earth.³ Inter-testamental literature picked up on this nuance of the commission of judges by God.

During the 2nd Temple period, there was a theological movement away from God serving as the sole judge, instead using intermediary figures who would participate in the exercise of justice. The Testament of Abraham describes Abel, the first son of man (Adam), as sitting on a throne where "he sits thus to judge all creation, and examines righteous men and sinners."⁴ While Abel was to judge throughout the course of history, it is the 12 tribes who would then judge men and sinners at the end of time.⁵ Nonetheless, the Testament of Abraham still stated that the final judgment belongs to God.

Similarly, I Corinthians 6:2-3 recognizes the 2nd Temple theological interpretation of God using intermediaries to judge the world, "Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels?" This does not mean that God is any less involved in this world—He didn't abdicate from His responsibilities. The theological implication is that God has always worked with people. Yet despite God's expectation for the righteous to intercede, to be just, and even at times to judge, all the scriptures clearly state that God is the ultimate authority and judge.⁶

² The New Testament contains several promises that the saints will become judges in the world to come. Exactly what is inferred, judicial, governmental, or partly both, is unclear. 1 Corinthians 6:2-3 says; "Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!"

³ See Isaiah 9:6-7, 11:1-5, 42:1-4

⁴ Testament of Abraham 1.13. From this Hebrews 12:24, after declaring that God is the judge of all, stated that Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant and His sprinkled blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. This referenced the understanding that Abel was an intermediary judge placed by God in order to judge the wicked.

⁵ Revelation 20:4 also declared that the martyrs would reign and judge with God after the judgment of Satan. Additionally, the disciples would judge in the world-to-come on 12 thrones.

⁶ Jude 1:9 recognizes a 2nd Temple theological interpretation of an intermediary that seems to have developed based on their understanding of Biblical ritual cleanliness. Deuteronomy 34:5-6 states that Moses died "and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab". Given the antecedent where God was speaking to Moses, it seems obvious that he was the one that buried Moses. However, since touching a dead body makes one unclean, the interpretation developed that the pronoun "he" was not God, but an intermediary figure. Rather than refuting this theological interpretation, Jude affirmed it, stating that it was the archangel Michael who was involved in the burial of Moses, even though it is clear from the verse that

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Jeremiah 33:14-16. Jeremiah declared that God would keep His promises. This seems obvious, but history records that many gods in the ancient world would lie, cheat, and deceive (particularly against one another). If God did not keep His promises we would not be able to trust Him any more than these false gods. These prophesies and promises coalesce around the Messianic redeemer described here as the righteous branch of David.⁷

While it is God who is the one who keeps His promises, the prophecy states it is the descendant of David who actually brings the promised justice and righteousness to the land of Judah. The focus of Jeremiah's prophecy is that it is the coming redeemer that will bring about the establishment of the rule and reign of God. While the passage focuses on the peace and salvation of both Jerusalem and Judah in particular, God's fulfillment of His promise to that particular land sets the precedent that God is a God who fundamentally keeps His promises.⁸ In the words of the Lord to Solomon, "My eyes and my heart will be there for all time." The Lord has made a promise, and He will see it done.

Michael did not dare to judge on his own. Angels sometimes carried out the judgment of God but in this case, even Michael, an Archangel, asks God to be the one who judges and rebukes Satan.

⁷ The term branch, *tzemach* (צֶמַח), was used by Isaiah but did not have a direct relation to the Messiah (Isaiah 4:2). Zechariah was more specific about the branch being an incredibly important person: someone related to the removal of iniquity of the land (3:6-9) and the building of the temple (6:12-13). Jeremiah, however, used the word to describe a specific descendant of David. This descendant's reign was also directly related to an age of redemption and safety (Jeremiah 23:5-8, 33:14-17).

Today, the term is still used in the Amidah in the 15th prayer, *Birkat David* (which is generally associated with the prayer of awaiting the Messiah) where it declares "Speedily cause the offspring (צֶמַח) of Your servant David to flourish (תִּצְמַח) and let him be exalted by Your saving power, for we wait all day long for Your salvation. Blessed are You, O Lord, who causes salvation to flourish (מִצְמַח).")

⁸ Some commentators interpret the land of Israel, the people of Israel, and Jerusalem as allegories, often replacing them with ourselves. While Scripture does use allegory in specific passages, if God were not literally keeping His promises to the people He made them with, we wouldn't know to whom or why He made these promises—or whether He kept them. Instead of viewing Jeremiah 33:16 as an allegory for anything other than Judah and Jerusalem, recognizing that God made a promise and will keep it strengthens our faith. It assures us that the same righteous Branch will fulfill His promises to us. God has not forgotten Jerusalem nor has it been cast aside for some other city as though God was utilitarian.

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Psalm 25:1-10.⁹ Psalm 25 is a personal lament of David¹⁰ before the Lord where he asks for God's help while waiting on Him.¹¹ Troubling situations are an unfortunate fact of life and thus the majority of us are able to identify with this lament. David composed this Psalm in order to plead for assistance, instruction, salvation, and forgiveness.

We understand that David desired God's instruction when he says, "show me Your ways". We all know that God's Word has good advice and we should not ignore it. The first half of Psalm 25:10 is going to be popular and resonant with us, "All the paths of the LORD are loving and true." We may lack understanding of the present tribulations we are going through but God is in control. David had already received God's grace and could trust that He would deliver him again. Unfortunately, the second half of Psalm 25:10 is often ignored "All the paths of the LORD are loving and true for those who keep His covenant and His testimonies."¹²

One of the mechanisms by which we can evaluate our covenantal relationship with God is the value we place on His instructions. Much of David's cause for lament wasn't inspired by people

⁹ Psalm 25 is also an acrostic poem, each line being well crafted and thought out expressions of truth beginning with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. David didn't hold strictly to the abecedary acrostic as he skipped *vav* and *qoph*, while using an extended *resh* and ending with a second *peh*. David also skipped the *vav* in Psalm 34 while adding a second *peh* at the end. The final statement, פדה אלהים (Redeem, O God), may have been a common refrain.

¹⁰ The genre of lament is common in the Book of Psalms, comprising the largest category of psalms. There are 42 individual psalms of lament and 16 national laments, which is more than a third of the book.

¹¹ David used Hebraic poetry to highlight the contrast between those who wait on the Lord and those who act treacherously. Those who wait will not be put to shame, while the treacherous will continue to be ashamed. In Psalm 25:4-5, David speaks of those who wait on God, describing them as walking according to His ways and truths. In contrast, Psalm 25:6-7 reflects on a time when David failed to wait on God and needed His pardon.

Waiting, קוה, is an active verb in Hebrew. 'To wait' is linked with other verbs such as "to look" in Job 6:19 or "be strong and take courage" in Psalm 27:14. In modern parlance, a waiter doesn't "wait all the day long" doing nothing—a waiter is constantly paying attention and then acting where appropriate. If waiting were completely passive, there would be no need for the Lord to renew their strength, as seen in Isaiah 40:31. Indeed, those who wait are also flying, running, and even walking.

¹² In a similar way to Romans 8:28, "All things work together for good." This is probably one of the most quoted verses in the Bible. The rest of the verse, however, is often ignored, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose." Perhaps we assume that we do love God or perhaps love has become such a modern, nebulous term it has no meaning anymore.

We also often fail to understand that God's love for us doesn't stop us from tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or sword (Romans 8:35). God's love was shown through Jesus' death. If we love God, we too may live in obedience to God, even if that obedience means we face distress, even death. And that may also be good.

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ignorant of God's covenants but from those who knew and yet chose not to listen or obey (including David himself). The value we place on God's instructions isn't defined by a numerical system but on whether we intentionally choose to be faithful and obey (keep) God's covenants (or run back to Him when we fail).

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13.¹³ Paul visited Thessaloniki during his second journey where he taught in the synagogue for three weeks.¹⁴ Even though Paul had only visited for a short time, he cared for the people of Thessaloniki deeply and in his own time of affliction was comforted by their faith and love.¹⁵ Paul and Silas had originally been run out of Thessaloniki (which is why he was only able to visit for three weeks), been opposed by Satan himself when he desired to visit them again, and was presently afflicted. Despite these trials, Paul's response to persecution was thanksgiving and joy for what God was doing in the lives of the Thessalonians.

Paul was comforted by the faith of the Thessalonians, but he still intended to return in order to "supply what is lacking in your faith" and see God "make you increase and abound in love for one another." Clearly the community already had faith and love, but there was still a need to mature and perfect their love and faith. Paul wanted to see them face-to-face to encourage them to continue in their faith even as they had comforted him by their testimony.¹⁶

Paul also admonished the community to maintain holiness, particularly in their hearts. Paul reminded them that the expectation of Jesus' return should motivate them (and all of us today) to increase our attitude and actions of love. Paul also encouraged them to more holiness. It is the church's hope that, when He returns, He will find us faithful.

Luke 21:25-36. Jesus warned His disciples of many disasters: the temple would be destroyed, both nations and families would be at war, the earth itself would rise up with earthquakes, famines, and plagues, and His disciples would be persecuted. Finally, Jerusalem would fall to

¹³ ACNA reading includes I Thessalonians 3:6-8

¹⁴ Many in the early church of Thessaloniki would have been part of the Jewish diaspora (Acts 17:4), however some, whether they were God-fearers who attended the synagogue or those who were persuaded of the Gospel, seem to also have been Gentiles as Paul wrote how they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."

¹⁵ Paul seems to have continued his relationship with some of the Thessalonians, working with Aristarchus and Secundus. He desired to return to Thessaloniki but Satan opposed Paul (how Paul was hindered wasn't elaborated on but Satan actively fights against the rule of God and is very real).

¹⁶ The personal interaction between shepherds and the flock is so important for both. Could Aristarchus, Secundus, or even Timothy have personally encouraged the Thessalonians to mature in love and faith? Almost certainly. Paul was literally writing a letter to them in order to encourage them. But intercession in prayer and in effort (for Paul quite literally walking for days on end simply to be with the Thessalonians while Satan opposed him) is so important—hopefully we can think of someone who went out of their way and impacted our lives to be more mature in holiness before God.

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foreigners. These events would occur “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” After that time, Jesus spoke signs in the sun, moon, and stars—signs the disciples would naturally relate to the day of the LORD.¹⁷ The day of the LORD would be frightful, even causing people to faint in fear. And then the Son of Man would come in the clouds.

The Son of Man was the preferred title of Jesus throughout His ministry. It was both an expression of His humanity, in Hebrew literally meaning “the son of Adam”, and an eschatological reference to Daniel 7. But, while Jesus spoke of Himself as the Son of Man, He came as a newborn child, born of a woman and without the great power and glory expected from the Son of Man to whom all people and nations would serve. At the time of this teaching, Jesus was physically present with His disciples on the Mount of Olives.¹⁸ If Jesus was the Son of Man, and the Son of Man was “coming in a cloud with power and great glory”, the question the disciples might ask would be when would this take place?

Jesus described to His disciples the incredible calamities that would befall the world at the coming of Messiah—referring to Himself.¹⁹ It sounds terrifying and understandably, people will panic. Talking about the end of the world can be quite unsettling. Yet, in the midst of the chaos, Jesus encouraged His followers to adopt a posture of hope and confidence, not fear or timidity. He said they should “straighten up and raise [their] heads, because [their] redemption is drawing

¹⁷ The prophets often spoke of the Day of the LORD and when they did it was often in the context of the sun, moon, or stars. Isaiah 13:9-10, 24:21-23; Joel 2:1-2, 10-11, 30-32, 3:14-15; Amos 5:18-20, 8:9-10; Zephaniah 1:14-16

¹⁸ Mark 13:3

¹⁹ Some commentators have attempted to link these events to the narrative of the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. Certainly, the narrative from Luke 21:5-24 was commonly thought to be about the local destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by many of the Church fathers. However, based on a literal reading of Jesus and the prophets, the astronomical events referenced in Luke 21:25 were not described in the histories of that time period.

Instead, there is, perhaps, a transitional phrase, “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” followed by this description in Luke 21:25-27. The Son of Man seated on the cloud described in Revelation 14:14 (along with Revelation 1:13), written after the destruction of the temple, is universally thought to be Jesus among orthodox Christians.

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near.”²⁰ Jesus assured them that the terrible tribulations would not last forever. We can have hope and confidence that redemption will come.²¹

The short parable of the fig tree was meant to indicate that the return of the Messiah could be recognized as near, not as a tool for calculation or date setting. The first mention of a fig tree in Scripture appeared in the Garden of Eden where its leaves were used to cover the shame of Adam and Eve. The fig tree featured at the beginning of the Bible and here the fig would be used as a motif for the end of time.²²

Jesus taught us to be alert, active in prayer, and watchful—not watching the world but examining ourselves. We will all have to stand before the Son of Man, who will judge the world as He was given authority by God. How, then, should we behave? As we remember both the first coming and the second coming of the Son of Man we are encouraged to put away deeds of darkness, contemplate the coming judgment, and repent. In some of His final words in Revelation, Jesus called us to repent—for surely He is coming soon.

Hebraic Perspective. In the first century, among the Jewish people, there was an expectancy of the coming redeemer—the hoped-for Messiah who would free them from the Roman yoke and usher in a period of peace and prosperity. The prophets instilled a sense of hope and expectation, proclaiming that God would hear the prayers of His people and send the redeemer. They also spoke of the abrupt appearance of the Messiah. Malachi 3:1 prophesied, “And the

²⁰ Amos stated that Israel should not desire the day of the LORD as it would be a terrible day (Amos 5:18). However, for those who are persecuted there will also be hope—redemption will come. Anecdotally, I've met a lot of people who are obsessed with the dates, times, and signs of the last days. Few of these people have their heads bowed to the ground because of deep persecution based on their obedience to the LORD. If we are so obsessed with the day of the LORD, perhaps we would be better served to seek the LORD, bring justice to the world, and act righteously—for the needy are at our gate. Otherwise, we may not be counted among those for whom redemption will come, rather it will come to those whom we turn away.

²¹ Paul told the community in Rome that they should “rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” Whether during our tribulation or in our redemption, we should not see the events that will occur before the day of the LORD with fear and trepidation. We should be vigilant and on our guard, but against the temptation to not be among the persecuted. Jesus warned His disciples against being overburdened by the worries and concerns of life—fearing God alone.

There can also be a temptation that the imminent return of Jesus can lead to a life of passivity. If the world is going to wars, famines, and death, why bother to do anything about it? If Jesus is going to return soon, why prepare for a life of pain and persecution? Jesus did not instruct us to wait for the rapture while doing nothing (nor should we eat, drink and be merry as we wait for the end). Passivity, self-indulgence, and even despair might mean that we are not the ones who can wait expectantly for Jesus' return with hope—for these are not hallmarks of obedience as a disciple of Jesus.

²² The fig tree also became a metaphor for the study of the Torah. Those who were blessed by God would sit under a fig tree to study, be guided by, and let the wisdom of God's instruction guard them.

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Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, He is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”

During His ministry, Jesus spoke several times of the return of the Son of Man.²³ In Revelation 1:3, He encouraged the faithful to be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming was near. In Luke 12:40 Jesus taught His disciples to watch for His return. “You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” There is a tension here: we are commanded to remain ready and be expectant, yet the actual return of Jesus is sudden and unexpected.

This hope and expectation remained alive in the Church. We look forward to Jesus' return, acting with the understanding that He will come soon. At the same time, we know that when He does come it will be as a thief in the night. Although we do not know the day or the hour, we prepare for His return—not by stopping what we are doing but by using our time to love God and our neighbour as we ought.²⁴

The anticipation of redemption gains momentum as people recognize the signs of the Lord's coming. However, this expectation varies based on our personal situations.

Yes, there can be a sense of hope if we are in a place of tribulation but there can also be a sense of fear and dread for those in a place of comfort and security or unbelief. God's return will shake the earth and we will all face Him as He sits in judgment. Unfortunately, not all within the church will look to this day with hope; some may even be deceived. Though we desire the day of the LORD, it will be a day of judgment.

Parts of the Christian world suffer extreme persecution while other parts live and work in affluence and security. For everyone, the end will come swiftly, as a thief in the night. Jesus said redemption was near for those bowed down. Why are they bowed down? It is because they are under duress, perhaps facing persecution or even martyrdom. These verses are words of comfort, assuring them that their trials will soon come to an end (although the exact moment of redemption is unknown). How we live and behave in anticipation of this day is the hallmark of the believer. It is not marked by self-indulgence but by self-control.

ACNA Readings

²³ Matthew 16:27, 24:30-44, 25:31-32 (and Mark 13:26-27); Luke 21:27-28; John 12:2-3

²⁴ If Jesus were to return tomorrow, we should work hard to provide for our family, care for the lonely, the widow, and the orphan, and (as one famous theologian stated) plant an apple tree. We should also repent.

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Zechariah 14:(1-2) 3-9. Jerusalem is where some of the most important events in human history have already taken place. This is because of God's choice and not due any inherent value of its own.²⁵ God protects Jerusalem from their many enemies, for they have no clear way to defend themselves. And so, when God gathered the nations against Jerusalem to battle, Jerusalem could not withstand the many nations. This is why the change from Zechariah 14:1-2 to verse 3 is so important.

Zechariah had a vision in which the city of Jerusalem would be besieged by a coalition of many nations brought together by God Himself—enemies of both God and His people. Although the exact reason for such a gathering at Jerusalem is unclear, the prophet was clear in informing us that the Lord has a guiding hand on the events leading up to the end of time. The battle against Jerusalem will result in victory for the nations bringing with it all the accompanying suffering and loss for its inhabitants. But when God's people are at the height of their distress, when the situation seems lost, the Lord will appear as a warrior to defend His city, His people, and His name.²⁶

When the LORD decides to come to earth, nothing will be able to stand before Him—even the Mount of Olives will split. The light will forbear to shine and yet it will not be cold. And a new blessing will flow out of Jerusalem as water will flow in Israel both summer and winter. He will also come with the holy ones—perhaps God's army of angels or the saints or both.²⁷ God will be victorious and rule over not only Israel but also all the earth.

²⁵ Geographically, Jerusalem is not important in any way. While much has been made of Israel being located in the middle of three worlds (Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and the Mediterranean along with Europe), Jerusalem was not a location that was excellent for trade, politics, or even agriculture. If Jerusalem had not been chosen by David above and beyond the many more natural capitals of Judah or Israel it would have been no more remembered in history than Gezer or Hazor—both of which were much more important than Jerusalem. Instead, Jerusalem was chosen by God (see Ezekiel 16) and He declared, "My Eyes and My heart are always here."

²⁶ Many Christians prefer to ignore the picture of God as a warrior, or think of it as something from a past era. However, Exodus 15:3 states, "The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is His name." Deuteronomy 1:30 and 20:4 both state that God will go before Israel to fight for them against their enemies while Joshua 5:13-15 shows Joshua talking to one of the commander's of the LORD's army. The Psalms and Prophets both mention God as a warrior while a few of the kings turned to God and saw Him fight on their behalf. And if we think that God has changed, Revelation 19:11-16 is clear that Jesus will lead the armies of heaven in conquest of His enemies.

²⁷ Daniel 4:13, 23 seems to speak of the holy ones as angels while Psalm 89:5-6 declared that the LORD God of hosts should be praised by the holy ones and the heavenly beings are incomparable to the LORD. Meanwhile, Daniel 7:18 seems to use the same term to speak of the saints on earth, along with Psalm 16:2.

The War Scroll (1QM) from the Dead Sea Scrolls, a piece of apocalyptic literature describing the final battle between God and His holy ones against Satan, his demons, and the nations of the world, portrayed a united effort where both angels and saints will fight alongside God.

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Zechariah 14:9 concludes with a reminder of the *Shema*, the oath of loyalty that Israel continues to proclaim twice daily.²⁸ This declaration calls God's people to have His law on their hearts and to love Him with all their heart, soul, and might. However, in the fulfillment of this prophecy, it will not be only Israel that obeys God, but the entire world.²⁹

Psalm 50.³⁰ The opening lines remind us that God speaks—He is not silent. Accompanying His voice is light as God shines forth in perfection, beginning at Zion—the holy city. Psalm 50:3 says that, when “God comes, He does not keep silence and before Him is a devouring fire”. The Psalmist reminds the worshipers of Mount Sinai, where God came from heaven and spoke. As He spoke His words were seen as fire.³¹ And again, “around Him a mighty tempest” which is seen in I Kings 19:11-12 in the mighty wind that tore at the mountain and the earthquake and fire. At Mount Sinai, whether from the might and power when God’s voice thundered and the Israelites were afraid or His quiet whisper to Elijah, God spoke and His people heard.³²

²⁸ The term “יהוה אחד”. the LORD is one, will always be linked to Deuteronomy 6:4-11:32

²⁹ Salvation in the Bible was never limited to Israel but is universal in scope. God will not only rule and reign in Jerusalem but also to the ends of the earth. Zechariah continued to show that God, the warrior, would destroy those nations that came to fight against Israel but the conclusion was that the nations would also come to Jerusalem not to fight but to worship during *Sukkot*, the Festival of Booths. Zechariah 14 is read every year in the synagogue as the Jewish people remember that one day Gentiles will join them in worship.

³⁰ This psalm is attributed to Asaph, a gifted composer for both David and Solomon and a prophetic seer (II Chronicles 29:30). Asaph (אסף) means to “gather”, something the Levite did as he gathered the people together at the Temple to sing the praises of God (Asaph makes a play-on-words with his own name, referencing to the gathering of the people in Psalm 50:5). Psalm 50 is traditionally part of the *Sukkot* (Feast of Tabernacles) liturgy as it reminds the hearer of Mount Sinai.

³¹ In a Hebraic mystery, the Word of God is something that can be seen. Following the giving of the Torah and the 10 Commandments at Sinai it is expressed in Exodus 20:18 that the people “saw the voices and the fires and the voice of the shofar” (literal reading). Psalm 18:8 notes that a “consuming fire came from his mouth”. In Acts 2 during *Shavuot*, following a now long developed and established Jewish tradition, languages are accompanied with visible tongues of fire.

³² I Kings 19:9-18 states that God spoke to Elijah in a voice of thinnest silence (or smallest stillness—it is not a whispered voice but something even quieter, yet still heard. See also Job 4:16). How can a silent voice be heard? God can call out in the thunder and miracles, and yet ears will not hear. However, sometimes God calls out in this silence and those God calls hear and obey. Nonetheless, whether we choose to listen and obey or not, God continues to call out. This belief in God’s continuous interaction with His creation developed into the concept of the *Bat Kol*.

The rabbinic world called this voice from heaven the *bat kol* (literally, “daughter of the voice”). *Pirkei Avot* 6.2 stated that God continuously sent out His voice from Mount Sinai every day—God never stayed aloof from His creation. God’s voice at Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration along with His voice in the thunder at the temple (John 12:28) were examples of God’s voice speaking to His people in the gospels.

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God was not the only character in the psalm to have a voice—the heavens also speak. They declare His righteousness and His redemptive activity, noting that the Lord is indeed the ruler. And God is also a judge—judgment will surely come.

An all-consuming fire will go before God as He will bring justice to the earth. As the creator, God has the right to expect that His creation will pay attention to His voice and come to the Lord. The psalmist does not provide any hint of rebellion at the beginning of the Psalm and so it is given that the “faithful ones” (Psalm 50:5) will actually come and appear before the Lord. Nonetheless, Asaph would have been declaring this Psalm in Jerusalem at the Temple where all Israel, the people of God, would gather.

The imagery that Asaph took from God's voice at Mount Sinai was to be a reminder of God's everlasting covenant with Israel. He would judge them first as both judgment and redemption starts with the people of God.³³ We too would do well to remember that God will judge us as His people.

Too easily do we pay attention to a single aspect of obedience to God while ignoring the whole of God's desire and commands. For many in Israel, it was simple to offer sacrifices to God as part of their cultural duty (or because of taxes). Obedience to God in offering sacrifice is, and must be, good as God commanded it. But God also commanded His people to be thankful and to fulfill their vows which Israel had made at Mount Sinai in saying, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.”

While Psalm 50:7-15 declared God's rebuke against His people, it also promised that He would deliver them if they turned to Him. On the other hand, Psalm 50:16-22 warns those who remain wicked. They will continue to act in opposition to their vows, casting God's words behind them. God's summoning his people as a judge should be terrifying, a reality that should lead all of us, His children, when calling out to God for deliverance into a renewed desire to fulfill our vows.³⁴

³³ II Maccabees 6:13-16 states that God's quick judgment upon His people is a mercy,

“In fact, it is a sign of great kindness not to let the impious alone for long but to punish them immediately. For in the case of the other nations the Lord waits patiently to punish them until they have reached the full measure of their sins, but He does not deal in this way with us, in order that He may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height. Therefore He never withdraws His mercy from us. Although He disciplines us with calamities, He does not forsake His own people.”

This idea is shown throughout the Scriptures: Proverbs 3:11-12 (and Hebrews 12:5-11); Deuteronomy 8:5; Psalm 94:12-13, 119:67, 71; Revelation 3:19.

³⁴ Think of the half-dozen things you or your church do really well in obedience to God and how often we speak or celebrate them—this doesn't prove our righteousness, only that we are doing a few things that God has commanded. But perhaps we are happy to work with a thief in a profitable business endeavour and Psalms 50:19-20, along with James 3, includes sins of the tongue that we so often ignore as less important.