

## **God's Abode**

Preached at Hanover Street Presbyterian Church

On August 17, 2003

By the Rev. Thomas C. Davis, Ph.D.

Texts:

### **1 Kings 8: 1,6,10-12, 27-30, 41-43**

Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion. . . Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. . . And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. Then Solomon said, "I have built you [O God] an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever . . . But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house which I have built! Yet have regard for the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, O Lord my God, hearkening to the cry and to the prayer which your servant prays before thee this day; that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may hearken to the prayer which your servant offers toward this place. And hearken to the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place; yes, hear in heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive. . ."Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake (for they shall hear of your great name, and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven, your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you; in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by your name.

### **Psalm 84: 1-4, 10**

How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at thy altars, O Lord of hosts, my king and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in thy house, ever singing thy praise! . . . For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

### **John 14: 1-7**

"Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's

house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him.”

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Lately I’ve been walking my son’s Border Collie, Ragga. He’s a bright dog, obedient and ready to please. But he also follows his wolfish instincts, one of which is to mark his territory. Even if we walk a familiar route, he marks and remarks where he’s been, and sniffs to discover who’s been there before him. Many of God’s creatures are like that. Whether we humans are instinctually territorial, like the wolf from whom Ragga descends, or whether we became so after leaving the nomadic life for farming, is a matter I’ll leave to the anthropologists. Suffice it to say that inhabiting and defending territory is a very strong trait in us, no more easily eradicated than Ragga’s propensity to mark four or five trees in a quarter mile. On this ever-more-crowded planet we humans must learn to live with this trait in ourselves, and honor its tenacity in others. We can no more shed our territorial nature than the leopard can his spots, or Ragga his wolfish ways.

The whole world is reeling now because of territorial disputes in the cradle of civilization, that fertile crescent in which three related religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, claim holy ground. When different peoples stake claims to the same territory as their rightful home, that in itself presents a considerable obstacle to dwelling peacefully together. But in addition, when some claim that God has given them this territory, and not just their own god, but God Almighty, the God of all the earth and all peoples, then the dispute becomes exceedingly complex and intense. And that’s precisely the fix we’re in, the whole world mind you, not just those living in the disputed territory, because the fighting has gone global through terrorism. So now the peace of all the earth hangs especially upon what happens in the so-called “Holy Land”. If peace-loving people everywhere want to win the “war against terrorism” they must educate themselves and work tirelessly for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Why? Because the militant, fundamentalist Islamic groups which now export terror worldwide did not exist prior to the birth of modern Israel. They arose out of and now flourish because of the frustration which followed Israel’s seizure of Arab lands—it should also be mentioned, by terror in the early phase--and the complicity of major nations, including ours, in that terror and thievery. Consequently, there is a logic underlying Islamic terrorism. It cannot be rightly understood simply in terms of madness, or religious fanaticism, as some of us would prefer to believe, because that gets us off the hook. Islamic terrorism is desperate, furious retaliation for perceived injustice. We will not win the war against terrorism without acknowledging that.

In this morning's sermon and next week's, I'm going to address critically the idea of holy land, that is, land presumably given to a particular people by almighty God. This idea is abundantly present in the Jewish scriptures, which we Christians also regard as sacred. Regrettably, this idea has been used numerous times to condone the killing, displacement, and oppression of indigenous peoples; for example--(and to name only a few of these examples)--by the Europeans who slaughtered and displaced the earlier inhabitants of this continent, by the Dutch Calvinist Boers, who did likewise in South Africa, and by the Zionists who created modern Israel by running Arabs off land which their ancestors had inhabited for millennia. In each of these instances, crimes against indigenous peoples were justified on the basis of something like what we Americans called, in the heyday of our own territorial expansion, our "manifest destiny." In other words, we boasted that we were God's newly chosen people, divinely destined to conquer and subdue, just as Joshua was divinely destined to conquer and subdue the Canaanites. Next week we'll take a close look at this appalling propensity for devout people to use the Biblical idea of a holy-land-for-a-holy people to cover their greed and justify their murdering and their robbing, all in the name of God.

But to work up to that, we have to examine in general the idea of sacred space. When you were little, did someone tell you that when you were in church you were in "God's house"? And if you spoke too loudly, or took to running where you shouldn't, were you scolded, as I was: "We don't do that in God's house!"

From such training, children form the notion that although God is everywhere present, God is somehow more strongly present in a grand chamber with stained glass windows, or, for that matter, in a silent meeting of somber adults, their heads bowed-- a house of prayer, in other words. We meet this thinking in today's passage from First Kings. Solomon, praying publicly for a blessing upon the splendid temple that he has just built for God to dwell in, pauses to note that this idea is a bit ridiculous. God doesn't need a house! Why, heaven itself cannot contain God! God is everywhere! Nevertheless, (if I might paraphrase), the temple Solomon has built for God can be understood as God's listening post. People direct their prayers to God there-- even foreigners may—and God listens especially hard for prayers prayed in that direction. Not that prayers cannot be made to God from other places. Of course they can. But the temple is a convenience for the people, a place for them to gather and be present to God, a place whose majesty and solemnity assures them that they are in the presence of their maker.

Throughout the story of faith recounted in the Hebrew scriptures, we notice that God's presence was felt especially strongly in a number of places. Adam and Eve walked with God as with a human companion in the Garden of Eden. When the Hebrews gained their freedom from Pharaoh and wandered in the Sinai desert, their leader, Moses, met God on a mountain top and received the holy laws that were to govern them. When they warred against the inhabitants of Canaan and were still without a home of their own, they carried around a portable shrine, the ark. God's glory, God's shining presence, was thought to

reside especially there, in that sacred object. And when they finally had settled in the land which God had promised to them, and Solomon had built a temple there, they included a special place in that temple, the “holy of holies,” where they placed the five books of Moses, the Torah. God’s presence was believed to be especially strong in that innermost chamber of the temple. In time, the entire city of Jerusalem, where the temple stood, was deemed holy. Some Jewish authors took to calling it “Zion,” symbolically linking the city to the mountain where Moses had met God.

So you see, several spaces in particular were regarded as holy by the Hebrew people, not because God’s presence was limited to them, but because some need had drawn them to those places. In those spaces they could pray most effectively, focusing their attention so that they might more readily perceive the presence of almighty, omnipresent, and ineffable God.

Some Christian scholars have said that Jesus ended sacred space, because he, in his person, became the “place” where divinity is encountered. That’s the import of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman drawing water at the well. He asks her for a drink of water, and she’s taken aback, you may remember, because he, a Jew, has asked her, a Samaritan, for a drink. She answers him in a way that brings up the running feud between their respective peoples about where the legitimate place for worship is: in Samaria or Jerusalem. Jesus answers her: “Believe me, the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem. . . God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth.” Sounds to me like Jesus is telling her that God’s abode isn’t geographical anymore. (Probably never was.) God’s abode is wherever the worshiper is standing in the truth.

In another gospel passage about sacred space, the one we read this morning, Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid of death, for in his “Father’s house are many rooms.” Thomas then asks Jesus what sounds like a geographical question: Where are these rooms? How do we get there? And Jesus answers in a way that says, “Thomas, you’re missing the point here. The issue of sacred space is passe. I am the way, Thomas, I am! It’s not about geography. A person is the way, don’t you see, not a place to seek out and be in. ‘The way’ is to get into my groove, Thomas. Seek my spirit, man. Live as I do!”

So, Christians, let’s not get into a bragging contest about whose land is holier than whose. And by all means, let’s stop predicating our foreign policy on ancient presuppositions about whose territory is divinely destined, or which occupants more blessed than others. Please! Aren’t we beyond that, church? Jesus has ended sacred space. God’s abode is in the human mind and heart, not on some mountain, or in some temple or cathedral, or within certain boundaries drawn on a map. It is high time that we take another look at modern Palestine through the spectacles of compassion which Jesus bids us wear, rather than the ancient ethnocentric ones which, though they be scriptural, have warped the

moral vision of naturally territorial humans, and enabled them to rationalize mass murder and theft as God's will. But more on that next week.

In concluding this sermon, let us pray that we ourselves might become, more and more each day, the dwelling place of God's spirit. Holy God, may we be thy abode!

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**Everywhere Lies Holy Ground**  
Preached at Hanover Street Presbyterian Church  
On August 24, 2003  
By the Rev. Thomas C. Davis, Ph.D.

Texts:

**Deuteronomy 7: 1-6**

When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you--the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amonites, the Canaanites, the Perizites, the Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you--and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. The the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he would destroy you with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

**Isaiah 61: 1-9**

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion--to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery

and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

#### **Luke 4: 16-29**

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

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This morning's sermon is the second in a pair about praying and working for peace in the Middle East, a peace that seems all the more elusive after the violence of last week, and the apparent collapse of a fragile truce.

Last week I noted how the creation of modern Israel, by means of the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, gradually provoked a militant Islamic counter-movement. Territorial disputes in Palestine thus have given rise to global terrorism. A "war against terrorism" must therefore address the issue of holy land. We headed in that direction last week when we considered the idea of sacred space--how God's spirit was first dramatically experienced on Mount Sinai, and then in a portable shrine, called the ark of the covenant, and then in the temple, and finally, in Jerusalem, where the temple was built. Then we noted how, for a very small minority of Jews and a growing number of Gentiles, sacred space ceased to be very important anymore, because God's spirit was experienced in a person, Jesus of Nazareth. We noticed that in the fourth chapter of John, Jesus said to the Canaanite woman: a time is coming when people won't argue anymore

about where God must be worshiped, because true worshipers will worship God “in spirit and truth.” Then Jesus told her, “I am the truth.” In other words, after Jesus, the epicenter of God’s spirit isn’t geographical anymore, it’s personal. And a faith that is focused in a person and not a place has the potential of removing an ancient theological justification for holy war, namely, the securing and defending of holy land.

But we cannot take away the theological ammunition that is used to justify making war over holy land without addressing the claim that that land is in fact holy, in other words, blessed and deeded by God to a particular people, excluding all others. Merely embracing a faith that is personal and not geographical cannot settle the ancient and enduring territorial dispute, which is bolstered by numerous Jewish scriptures claiming that God Almighty did give Palestine to the Hebrew people, and also gave them license to use “ethnic cleansing” to take that land away from indigenous peoples. I have noted in other sermons that money is a major topic in the Christian scriptures. In the Hebrew scriptures, it’s land. A renowned Presbyterian, Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann says that land is the best way to organize biblical theology. Land is a central, if not the central theme of biblical faith, he says. Obviously, we cannot ignore the importance of claims about holy land in the Jewish faith, a faith that historically underlies our own.

What to do, then, with texts like the one we read from Deuteronomy this morning? I used to wonder about that when I would read the Bible to my sons before bed time. We had decided to go more or less through the whole Bible, omitting only the who-begat-whom passages. I didn’t censor the violence, and there’s plenty of it in the Hebrew scriptures, much of it related to fights over territory. At last, after wading through the Hebrew scriptures, we got into the somewhat less violent Christian ones; and my sons said, “Aw, Dad. This is boring. We want more blood and gore! More tent pegs through the head, yeah!” (Don’t ever think that you’ll protect your kids from violence by rationing just their T.V.!)

As I was saying, what do we do with passages like the vicious one we heard from Deuteronomy this morning? Well, I’ll tell you what the church does. The church censors. If you look at our lectionary, the list of suggested readings for Sunday worship, you’ll discover that the nasty side of the exodus stories is consistently left out. I mean the side that tells about how that promised land had to be taken from the people who lived there first, how they had to be ruthlessly slaughtered, all their property and sacred places destroyed--all this, mind you, in the name of Yahweh. No wonder our lectionary omits such passages! What are we to make of them, in light of the gracious, forgiving God we find in the stories of Jesus? Michael Prior writes, in his provocative and insightful book, *The Bible and Colonialism*:

“A major problem with some of the traditions of the Old Testament, especially those concerned with the promise of land, is its portrayal of God as . . . a racist, militaristic

xenophobe, whose views would not be tolerated in any modern democracy.”

The problem, in other words, is that when you read the Bible through the spectacles of universal human rights, God comes across as a bully and a tyrant. How could a loving God countenance such ethnic cleansing as we find in our first reading today ? I am not willing to go the route of Calvin and say: God is almighty. We mustn't question God's authority! What God ordains is right! Horse feathers! Such theology is all too convenient. It underwrites claims to absolute authority made by pompous people who want to appear pious in order to cloak their own lust for power in the guise of God's will.

Such a theology justified the seizure of this land, America, from the peoples who lived here first. In September of 1689 the Puritan preacher, Cotton Mather, delivered a sermon in Boston in which he charged the colonial armed forces of New England to consider themselves to be like Israel in the wilderness, confronted by Amalek. They must cast out the Indians “as dirt in the streets,” he said.

Such a theology underwrote the apartheid system of racial oppression in South Africa. Paul Kruger, the President of the South African Republic leaned heavily on Calvin's teaching about a covenant people. The success of the Dutch Boers in retaining their territory by warfare in South Africa was proof, he said, of God's election. Black Africans, he insisted, were not among God's people, and were destined by God to be kept in perpetual subjugation by their white masters.

Such a theology underwrote the seizure of land from Arabs in Palestine, not just Muslim, but Christian too. At first, Jews' appetite to repossess their ancient homeland was not much religiously motivated. In fact, many Jews all over the world opposed the formation of a Jewish state, because they said the survival of Judaism had become possible regardless of place. The two thousand year old dispersion of Jews all over the world had taught them to build Jerusalem in their hearts, they said. But gradually, just as in other colonial adventures, a lust for territory found convenient justification in ancient texts. Today, not only Jews but many Christians too, support Israel's exclusive right to the holy land, because, they claim, the Bible teaches this.

Well, my brothers and sisters in Christ, who abhor the global terrorism that now grips us, the time has come for us to grapple with those ancient texts that have underwritten land grabbing in the name of God ever since the medieval crusades. The problem isn't that the texts have been misunderstood and misused. The problem is that the texts themselves are morally suspect, and have been from the start. We cannot take them as God's normative word, because they are morally atrocious. Such a view will raise the hackles of Jewish and Christian fundamentalists alike. So be it. As Michael Prior says, “There are major errors involved in a naive interpretation of the Bible, and every effort must be made to rescue it from being a blunt instrument in the oppression of one people by another.”

To see how we might begin to grapple with the moral challenge of such ancient texts concerning holy land, I invite you to look with me at one such text, a text which Jesus himself interpreted, Isaiah 61: 1-9. This text dates from a time after the Jews were returning to their homeland from exile in Babylon (roughly the territory of modern Iraq). The passage begins:

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. . .”

Who are these oppressed, these broken-hearted people, these prisoners? They are the exiled Jews, yearning for reinstatement to their promised land. The passage goes on to say that they shall return, and they shall build up the ancient ruins, repair the ruined cities. And what shall happen to the foreigners in the land which they shall reinhabit? They shall be the servants of the Jews. “Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines,” says the text. And restored Israel shall “enjoy the wealth of the nations”, that is, the goyim, the non-Jews. The rhetoric is moderate here—nothing like the ethnic cleansing language we found in the Deuteronomy passage—but the intent is still quite clear: God will subdue the foreign people who have been living in the promised land during the Jews’ absence. If the foreigners continue to live in that holy land, they shall be Israel’s servants, supporting Israel with the fruit of their labor. Even such a moderate scripture may be cited by Zionists to justify the economic exploitation of Arab people within “their territory.”

But listen to what Jesus does with this passage. In Luke 4 he quotes from it when he visits his home town and is invited to preach in the synagogue. The attendant brings him the scroll, and he reads from it: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me.” The Luke passage begins with a similar prelude: “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee.” We see Luke constructing a parallel. (Now, keep in mind that Galilee is the region of the ancient holy land that was most ethnically diverse. “Can anything good come from Galilee?” someone quipped about Jesus. Why? Because many Jews looked down on foreigners, that’s why, and Galilee was rife with them. Galilee was a ritually contaminated place, chock full of ignorant, contemptible goyim. So, Jesus gets up and reads from the scroll, those ancient, comforting words for Jews, words which made them feel free again, but at the expense of foreigners:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Please note that the words Jesus reads aren’t precisely the same as Isaiah wrote. Was he reading a different version of the scripture, or was Luke taking some creative liberty with the text? We shall see.)

Luke says Jesus read the text, rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. Nothing more. Just silence. He kept them in suspense. Well, what about the exegesis, Jesus? Comment on the passage, please! You came here to preach, right? Jesus obliges them by answering with a stinger, but they don't know it's a stinger yet, because they don't realize the scope of what he says, don't realize that his answer involves not just their own kind, but all those foreign folk they hold in contempt. Jesus says: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled."

"How lovely," everyone says. Well, of course, it's fulfilled! Here we are, safe and sound in our synagogue, isolated and protected from those wretched goyim outside, who once again, have our land. Jesus is saying we'll get it back one day, and it sounds like that won't be long! He said the prophesy is being fulfilled in our very hearing. Our time is coming! We shall be free of the goyim at last. Praise God!

But then Jesus unpacks the stinger. The scope of Isaiah's prophesy--at least as he sees it--is much, much broader than any of his fellow worshipers have realized, for it includes the contemptible goyim. They too shall be comforted, they too shall be freed. Implication: the Jews shall not be restored to their rightful place as God's chosen people at the expense of foreigners. As is his wont, Jesus makes this point indirectly and anecdotally, so that they have to sniff out God's truth with their imaginations. Please note, he adds, that in the day of Elijah, with so many Jews suffering from famine, God helped a foreign widow, a woman from Sidon (that is, a Philistine or Palestinian) not a Jewish widow. Also, when there were so many lepers in Israel, whom did God heal? Naaman, a Syrian (again, a foreigner).

That's all Jesus said. It was enough. They were fit to be tied. They were ready to kill him. Off the cliff with him! Why? Because Jesus had refused to buy into the conventional understanding of an ancient text that said it was all right in God's eyes to pay Paul by robbing Peter, it was all right in God's eyes to give a blessing to a chosen people by taking away from foreigners. By the way, Luke changes the ending of the Isaiah quote in a very significant way. Isaiah says that he has come, anointed by God's spirit, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God." But when Jesus reads Isaiah's words, he says simply, "I have come to declare the year of the Lord's favor," period. Not vengeance, but favor. That says it all. Jesus isn't fighting battles with anyone anymore over holy ground. In his eyes, everywhere lies holy ground, everywhere, because God's spirit has been unleashed. The Jews can't lay exclusive claim to it anymore than they can to holy ground. Everywhere lies holy ground, because the spirit blows where it wills.

Eventually, the people who followed Jesus in this heretical exegesis understood the implications of his vision. So it's not surprising that the theme of holy land qua real estate disappears in the Christian scriptures. Holy land isn't important to Jesus' followers anymore, because everywhere lies holy ground. When Jesus is raised from death, the

Spirit tells them: “Stay in the city (Jerusalem) until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24.49). “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” Christianity, in Luke’s view, is not tied to any specific land. It’s mission is to the ends of the earth.

I have preached these two sermons about the topic of holy land in our sacred scriptures, because that topic is dreadfully important in current affairs. We live still in a democracy—may God help us to preserve it—where the people have power to make change. We, ordinary citizens have power as agents of good will in this turbulent world, where territorial disputes lie at the center of the maelstrom. But we will not be agents for peace if we remain ignorant of the history that has brought us to this point, and also complacent about the role of our own theology in that history. Therefore, I call you to read, people. I call you to ponder. I call you to grapple with ancient texts and not blindly follow where priests and politicians mislead. I call for you to catch the vision of Jesus, that everywhere lies holy ground. And then advocate and agitate for that vision. Be not luke-warm, but afire with his Holy Spirit, the Spirit that brings good news to the poor, opens the eyes of the blind, and releases captives, everywhere. Everywhere!