

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

The Very Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Dean

Scripture: Various

"Why I Believe" (part 9)

THE FINAL REASON

We began a series on Easter Sunday entitled "*Why I Believe?*" The purpose of the series was to give reasons why we should believe that the God of the Bible is the One True and Only God. Recall I said I found seven reasons to believe. They are found in our liturgy and in God's Word. To know them is to know why you believe what you believe. And to know them is to enable you to do what the Apostle Peter tells us in **1 Peter 3:15**, "*always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is within you ...*"

Some of the series may have been a bit of a review, but such basics need to be reviewed over and over again. And honestly, there were many details that we found that are not always commonly known or remembered. So I encourage everyone to get copies of the sermons of this series. We already looked at six reasons to believe – 1) the natural world and universe (ie. creation); 2) the reality of truth; 3) the Bible; 4) Jesus Christ; 5) Life experience and 6) the Church. Today I would like us to look at the nation of Israel.

THE CALLING OF ABRAM/ABRAHAM

The very history and existence of the people and nation of Israel is a convincing reason to believe. Why is that? Let me begin with a brief history lesson. We all know about Abram ("exalted father") whose name God changed to "Abraham" ("exalted father of many") because of a covenant God made with him about 4000 years ago. God said to him in **Gen. 12:1-3**: "*Go forth from your country, And from your relatives and from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse.*"

That is God talking. Abraham listened and left his home in the land of Ur (modern day Iraq and ancient Babylon) to go to a new land. This new land would include what is today known as modern day Israel. This was the promised land because it was promised by God to Abraham and his descendants. And actually the full promise of the land is found in **Gen. 15:18**: "*...I'm giving this land to your descendants, from the river of Egypt to the great Euphrates River...*" The Lord stated further in **Gen. 17:7-8**: "*I'm establishing my covenant between me and you, and with your descendants who come after you, generation after generation, as an eternal covenant, to be your God and your descendants' God after you. I'll give to you and to your descendants the land to which you have traveled—all the land of Canaan—as an eternal possession. I will be their God.*"

God's promise included not only land but descendants. In fact, God said that Abraham would have descendants as numerous as the stars above and it would be through a son that the blessing would come (**Gen. 22:15-18**). The only problem was that Abraham and his wife Sarah were too old to have children. But God made another promise. Abraham and Sarah would have a son by God's power. And sure enough,

Sarah did conceive and gave birth to a son they named Isaac. Isaac grew up and had a son named Jacob, and Jacob had twelve sons whose descendants became the twelve tribes of Israel. These tribes were eventually enslaved by the Pharaohs of Egypt. But God raised up a leader named Moses to lead His people also known as the Hebrews out of their slavery in Egypt and back into the promised land that would be called Israel. Eventually, Israel became a great kingdom under David and Solomon. But due to the sins of David and Solomon, the kingdom of Israel split into two kingdoms known as Israel and Judah. Despite the split and despite the rebellion of the people of Israel, God had promised that a descendant of Abraham would bless all the peoples of the earth and that it was later revealed to David that this descendant would be from his line, from the tribe of Judah, thereby also confirming the original prophecy of a king from Judah who would rule over the entire earth in **Gen. 49:10** (cf. **Lk. 3:33 & Heb. 7:14**).

THE HEBREWS, ISRAELITES AND JEWS

The promises bestowed upon the Hebrews and later the Israelites were then continued with the people of Judah who became known as the Jews since they were the remnant left from the southern kingdom of Judah. For sadly, due to continued disobedience to the Lord, Judah also fell. And for the rest of their history, what once was the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah would be overrun and controlled by the Gentile nations. So the various empires of Persia, Greece and Rome ruled over the Jewish people.

THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH

And yet, the prophets of old, even Moses himself, foretold of a day when God’s Messiah, greater than any prophet who ever lived, would come to earth to rule and reign from Jerusalem. Thus, when Jesus came the first time to earth, we are told He came first to the lost sheep of Israel. Many thought He would overthrow the Roman Caesar and his pagan empire but He did not. Disappointed, many called for Christ’s crucifixion. Were the prophecies of old incorrect? No, it turns out. We know from the prophecies of **Isaiah 53** and others that the Messiah would come the first time to suffer and die. He would be first rejected by His people and He would die not just for His people but for all mankind – for Jew and Gentile alike.

His Kingdom as He states to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate ***would not be of this world (Jn. 18:36)***. Likewise, to receive His authority and power would not come from any earthly source or institution but from that which is spiritual and cannot be seen in the natural. Jesus said in John 3 we must be born again; there must be a spiritual birth, and He likened the Holy Spirit to the wind – something you can’t see. And then after His resurrection Jesus told His disciples in **Acts 1:8**, ***“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth.”***

But make no mistake. Jesus said that His kingship one day would be established once and for all over planet earth. He promised to return. For we read further in **Acts 1:9-12**: ***“And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. 10And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. 11They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?***

This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven. 12Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away."

The implication is that Jesus will be returning to Jerusalem. Now where did Jesus say He was coming back to Jerusalem? He said in **Mt. 23:37-38**: before His arrest and crucifixion, ***"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. 38"Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! 39"For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'"***

In other words, Christ would not come back to Jerusalem until they actually welcome him as their Messiah. And that will not happen until His Second Coming.

What will be the state of the world when He returns? Israel will be its own nation once again and it would be surrounded by enemies. We read in **Zechariah 14:2-5**: ***"For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city will be captured, the houses plundered, the women ravished and half of the city exiled, but the rest of the people will not be cut off from the city. 3Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as when He fights on a day of battle. 4In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south. 5You will flee by the valley of My mountains, for the valley of the mountains will reach to Azel; yes, you will flee just as you fled before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD, my God, will come, and all the holy ones with Him!"***

Jesus also spoke of the rise of false prophets and revealed to the Apostle John in His Revelation to John of a final world political leader as well as false prophet or religious leader who would rise to power before the Son's return. What did the Apostle Paul write concerning this world ruler? **2 Thess. 2:1-4**: ***"Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God."***

So what do we learn about Christ's return from the aforementioned passages? He is returning to Jerusalem and His people Israel (the Jews) who will be surrounded by enemy nations and there will be a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

THE WITNESS OF HISTORY

And so, what do we find in human history that has prepared us for Christ's very return? Everything that has happened since Christ's Ascension; again, the focal point being Israel. Do you ever wonder why Israel and the Middle East is always in the news? Do you ever wonder why the world's attention is always brought back to Jerusalem? Some may think it is about the oil, and certainly that is an issue; but only a

secondary one. There is constant turmoil there because ultimately Muslims believe that the Jews, that the nation of Israel should not exist; and those who do think they should be allowed on some of the land do so only if Jerusalem is controlled by Islam. Did you know that? It's all about the land, it's all about who is in control. Because in Islam once a territory falls to Islam, it always belongs to Allah and can never be relinquished.

Now I want you to think about something for a moment. Islam began in 610 AD. The Koran was written down about 30 years later. When were the first five books of the Old Testament written? Over 1500 years earlier. And do you know what God says in His Word? God said in **Lev. 25:23**: ***"The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me."*** In other words, the God of Israel, not Allah, owns the land!

We just saw how the Lord gave the land to Abraham and His descendants. Muslims contend that that Abraham is their father, but they also say that Ishmael is the true son of promise not Isaac, and that the Jews are frauds. And so, just as the Jews were surrounded by enemies their entire history they are once again.

Israel is surrounded by Muslim nations, the majority who believe Israel should not be on their land.

For over 2000 years the land of Israel was trodden over by the Gentiles by over seven different empires. In fact, 62 years after the fall of Jerusalem, in 132 AD, in order to humiliate the Jews and remove any Jewish association with their land, Rome renamed their land *"Syria Palaestina"* after Israel's most bitter enemy, the Philistines. Throughout history and to this day, Israel's adversaries still use the term "Palestine" to downplay or reject the notion that the land belongs to the Jews.

Things began to change, however, when the British defeated the Ottoman Turks at the Battle of Beersheba and later took Jerusalem. For the first time in 673 years Jerusalem was not controlled by Muslims! The British and Australians then entered into Jerusalem and removed the Turkish administration from power. As a result, this defeat is called by Muslims to this day the "Great Catastrophe." This set the stage for the Jews to be able to return to their original homeland; and after WW2, on May 14, 1948, in part due to the efforts of President Truman and others, Israel became nation in a day by UN decree, thus fulfilling the prophecy of the Lord about the end times found in **Is. 66:8-10**, ***"Who has ever heard of such a thing? And who ever sees such things? Can a country be born in a single day, or can a nation be brought forth in a single moment? Yet no sooner was Zion in labor than she delivered her children. Am I to open the womb and not deliver?" asks the LORD. "And when I bring to delivery, am I to close the womb?" asks your God. "Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be happy for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in gladness, all you who mourn over her,"***

Thus, after 2,000 years of being out of the land, Israel became an independent state on May 14, 1948. God's word states why:

In **Ez. 36:22** the Lord declared, ***"... I'm not about to act for your sake, you house of Israel, but for the sake of my holy reputation..."***

And in Ez. 11:17, *"...I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again."*

But do you know what happened as soon as Israel was recreated? As foretold in Ps. 83:2-4, *"See! Your enemies rage; those who hate you issue threats. They plot against your people and conspire against your cherished ones. They say, 'Let us go and erase them as a nation so the name of Israel will not be remembered anymore.'"*

The very next day, on May 15, 1948, Israel's "War of Independence" started as six neighboring Arab states began *"to rage or tumult"* (Ps. 83:2) with armies, weapons, and threats. It was with this aggressiveness they launched a holy war to annihilate the newborn state of Israel. Arab League Secretary, General Azzam Pasha, declared, "This will be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusades." The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin Al Husseini, who had met with Hitler in 1941 and had been involved in recruiting support for Germany among Muslims during WW2 proclaimed, *"I declare a holy war, my Moslem brothers! Murder the Jews! Murder them all!"*

Israel's military equipment was old and unreliable, and her army vastly outnumbered. Only God could save this tiny state. Humanly speaking, she looked like Gideon with his army of 300 going against the mighty Midianites (Judges 8-9). However, like with Gideon, God fought her battle and she survived.

Less than twenty years later, this time in June of 1967, Israel was about to be attacked yet again by surrounding Arab armies. However, in a pre-emptive air and ground attack the Israelis not only ended up destroying the enemy's air forces but overwhelmingly defeated the Arab ground forces as well. As a result, Israel took over land that had been under Arab control but had been used as a base of attacks upon the Jewish state. What resulted was that Jerusalem, a city that had been divided between Jewish (on the West) and Arab (on the East) was now in completely Jewish hands. This land provided a bargaining chip and Israel gave back the Suez to Egypt for peace in 1978. They gave Gaza back to the Palestinians but for many Muslims this is not enough.

The only reason the animosity of Islam towards Israel has died down a bit in the last two years is because of the rise of ISIS. Shia and Sunni are locked in a struggle for the heart of Islam. But make no mistake, if they were not fighting against each other, they would have their sights on Israel.

Not surprisingly, ISIS detests the "Zionist regime" (their term for Israel). In April 2013, ISIS advanced its operation from Iraq into Syria; and changed their name from the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) to "and al-Sham," translated as "the Levant" or "Greater Syria." This signified their mission was to conquer a wider area than present-day Syria (i.e., to include Israel) Why? "To reestablish the caliphate of the Levant." Consistent with their name, and Satan's pattern, they plan to seize the land for Islam. The following are two of their declarations:

"History will judge us after we free Palestine."

"All countries in this region are playing the sectarian card, just as they have long played the Palestinian card, but the difference with ISIS is that we are serious about Palestine and they are not. Tel

Aviv will fall as fast as Mosul when the time is right." It is surprising that our president likes to call ISIS, "ISIL" a reference to the region known as the "Levant" which includes Israel. Some say it is an indirect recognition that Israel really should ultimately be under Islamic control. But in the end it does not matter. God will protect His people and will set the stage for the return of Jesus Christ to Israel.

We read in **Joel 3:1-2**: ***"For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat. Then I will enter into judgment with them there on behalf of My people and My inheritance, Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations; And they have divided up My land."***

Why has Israel been oppressed by the Gentiles? Why have the Jews been persecuted so? Satan hates Israel and the Jews because it is from Israel and Judah that the Messiah came and it is to Israel and Judah that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, will return!

TRUSTING GOD AND STANDING WITH ISRAEL

So why do I believe? One word – Israel! Despite 2000 years of exile, intense persecution, conquest by at least seven different empires, it's an absolute miracle she exists. And in spite of being surrounded and outnumbered by her enemies, Israel will survive, proving God's faithfulness. Truly, the day is coming when ALL of Canaan will be her land — *"from the river of Egypt to the great Euphrates River; (Gen. 15:18)* and she will *"possess the gate of her enemy" (Gen. 22:17)*

God is faithful and true. To attack God's people and the land He gave to Israel is to attack God Himself. Jesus is returning to Jerusalem. He is returning to the place that He was first rejected. And when He does, He will be received by His people! – both Jew and Gentile alike (**Zech. 12:10**).

The truth is the Lord's gifts and callings are irrevocable (**Rom. 11:29**). Canaan was promised, by a covenant, first to Abraham and then to his descendants, the people of Israel, as an everlasting possession (**Gen 17:8**). His land was not to be divided, and those doing so will be punished (**Joel 3:2**).

Therefore, we are to stand with Israel and her right to exist in the Promised Land. By doing so, we stand with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Her enemies, like ISIS, will continue Satan's pattern, but they won't succeed because, as **Proverbs 19:21**, says, ***"Many plans occupy the mind of a man, but the LORD's purposes will prevail!"*** In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!