

SERMON RECAP FROM MAY 11, 2025

4TH SUN. OF EASTER, ISAIAH 66:7-14

Marching to Zion

Sermon by Robb McCoy

"Marching to Zion" is the last song in our hymnal, and in a way, it is the second to last hymn as well. The words that Isaac Watts wrote are set to two different tunes, but the most popular is the one we sang today. This rousing march by Robert Lowry matches the energy created by Watts's lyrics. It, and other songs by Watts, became popular among early American black population. The term "Spiritual" that describes a genre of music that became popular among slaves and African American people might have been taken from the name of one of his hymn collections.

"Marching to Zion" is a rousing song that has many layers of meaning, and this is reflected in the many parts that can be sung. The very concept of Zion itself is one with many meanings.

On the most basic level, Zion was the name of the hill upon which David built the city of Jerusalem. As King, David wanted to centralize his government and consolidate his power. He brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem in a grand show, and established Zion as the seat of God as well as the Davidic Monarchy.

In Scripture, Zion and Jerusalem seem to be used interchangeably. However, Zion appears in poetry more often. This shows that the idea of Zion broadened from simply a place or a city to a metaphoric concept. Zion, often personified as feminine, is sometimes the people of Israel as a whole. Sometimes Zion is the daughter of God. Sometimes Zion is the mother of the people.

For Christians, the concept of Zion has often been combined with the second coming of Christ, or the establishment of the Kingdom of God. To some, Zion is the heavenly goal, a place we find ourselves after death. Even more broadly, Zion is the place where God meets God's people. Thus Zion can mean many and all of these things.

In our passage of Isaiah, Zion is multilayered. It is at once the city of Jerusalem, where the people are returning. The last chapter of Isaiah describes the actual event of the end of the exile, when the people who were sent away to live in Babylon were allowed to return.

In this passage Zion is also the mother of the people, birthing something new and miraculous. The restoration of Israel is said to be as wonderful as a mother giving birth with no pain. It is a chance for the people to be born again. Yet this march to Zion is more than reestablishing a city. It is a reminder to us that redemption is possible.



Isaac Watts wrote "Marching to Zion" and hundreds of other hymns. He is considered the father of English hymnody, as he was one of the first to write songs that made poetic use of Scripture and themes instead of setting music to Psalms and direct quotes of the Bible.

When we read the last chapter of Isaiah, we should also remember the first chapter, which names the reason God is angry with Israel. Among the charges are this: "Everyone loves a bribe and pursues gifts. They don't defend the orphan, and the widow's cause never reaches them" (Isaiah 1:23). Yet God's promise is found in the same passage, "Zion will be redeemed by justice, and those who change their lives by righteousness" (Isaiah 1:27).

As we march to Zion, we are marching to the beat of justice. The Good Shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness, and that path is a march to Zion. We march together, side by side knowing that we can get there together.

We march to Zion singing songs of justice, peace, and redemption. Justice will redeem Zion and there we will find the place God meets God's people.

Marching to Zion is not the same as "Zionism"

Zionism is the idea that the nation of Israel has a right to exist as a safe homeland for Jewish people. This concept however, can be misused and can become the motivation for injustice against others.

Reform Zionism is a type of Zionism that does not long for a theocratic government, but instead values the founding document of Israel which states:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will ... foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture...."

To learn more about Reform Zionism, go to reformjudaism.org, and search their site with the words "Reform Zionism."