

# Shall We Go to the Valley or to the Mountain

Hespeler, November 9, 2025 © Scott McAndless – Remembrance Sunday

Joel 3:9-12, Micah 4:1-5, Psalm 98, Luke 20:27-38

Imagine for a moment that you are a peasant living in the fifth century BC in Judea. You spend your days working hard to take care of your little plot of land.

In order to do that, you have just a few pieces of precious equipment that have been passed down in your family for generations. You have a long pole with a metal hook on the end. You use this to prune the branches of your olive tree and your fig tree so that they are able to produce fruit.

## Your Equipment

You also have a plowshare – a little bit of metal that you attach to the end of your plow so that it is able to dig into the earth and create furrows to plant your seed.

But that is about it. There are no other metal tools on your farm. These ones should ideally be made of iron. I mean, this is the fifth century BC, and the Iron Age started centuries ago!

But have you seen the price of iron these days? So, maybe you envy your neighbour's iron plow and pruning hook, maybe you borrow them whenever he'll let you, but yours are unfortunately only made of bronze.

## A Call to War

So there you are, just managing to get by and feed your family using the tools that you have. But one day all of this is disrupted by a call to war. Some enemy has been identified, and they must be defeated and so the call has gone out to all the people. **“Proclaim this among the nations: Consecrate yourselves for war; stir up the warriors. Let all the soldiers draw near.”**

Except there is one problem. The nation doesn't have any warriors or soldiers sitting around and waiting for that call. It is a simple agricultural nation; there is no standing army. The call for warriors is a call to you! **“Let the weakling say, ‘I am a warrior.’”**

And the standing army is not the only thing lacking. There is also no military budget. (You think Canada underfunds its military; well, you have no idea!)

No military funding in ancient Judea means no supplies, no weapons, no war infrastructure. So, what are you supposed to do? How are you supposed to prepare yourself to stand on the battlefield? Well, you are expected to **“beat your plowshare into a sword and your pruning hook into a spear.”**

## Abandoning Your Family

So let me get this straight. You want me to abandon my family and farm. You want me to leave them to fend for themselves while I go and risk my life on the field of battle, from which I may never return or may only return severely wounded.

And you also want me to take the only tools that I have, and take a great wooden hammer and beat them against a rock until they are somewhat straight and useless for farm work, but are



poor substitutes for proper weapons. And you want me to take those tools away from my family so that they can't even work the land while I am gone?

## Dealing With the Call to War

That is the situation that is described in our reading this morning from the Prophet Joel. We do not know what particular battle the prophet is summoning the people to or when. But when you receive that call, you may not even care where you are going. Your country is calling on you, and you are going to go even if you have to provision yourself and even if you go at great risk.

Reading Joel's prophecy today does feel fitting, doesn't it? Today and on Tuesday, we are certainly remembering many who responded to that very sort of call. They put their lives and careers on hold. They left families and loved ones behind and went at great personal cost because their country needed them and had called. We have nothing but gratitude and love for those who have done that.

## Ambivalence

And yet we also feel somewhat ambivalent on these occasions because we recognize that loving and appreciating warriors is not the same thing as loving or appreciating war.

And I think that Joel's call recognizes that ambivalence. Not only does he highlight the fact that families are left destitute, that farms are left to go to weed, and the tools for working them are destroyed. He also calls the nations to a specific place called the "Valley of Jehoshaphat."

## War is Hell

The Valley of Jehoshaphat is a deep valley on the east side of Mount Zion in the old City of Jerusalem. It is also called the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom, or Gehenna. As you may know, Gehenna was the word that Jesus used when he spoke about hell.

That's right, Joel is not talking about the physical valley near Jerusalem, he is using it as a metaphor. He is calling the nations of the world to Hell because he knows that war is hell. And here you thought that U.S. General Sherman was the first one to say, "War is hell." Well, as is true of many things, the Bible said it first.

## Micah's Call

On this day, we do thank the warriors and recognize all that they and their families have sacrificed. But we don't celebrate war itself. We pray for peace. We pray for a world where that kind of service and sacrifice is not needed.

And that takes us out of the Valley of Jehoshaphat to the top of a nearby mountain. Another prophet, the Prophet Micah, heard the call of Joel and he asked, "But do we really have to go to the Valley of Jehoshaphat – the Valley of Hell?" And he decided that the answer to that question was no. He decided that God might be calling us to a mountain instead.

**"In days to come," the Prophet Micah declared, "the mountain of the LORD's temple shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the**

**LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”**

## Which Mountain?

The mountain he is talking about is just a little bit to the west of the Valley of Jehoshaphat. It is the one called Mount Zion. The Temple of the LORD, the God of Israel stood there in that day, but it is where the Islamic Dome of the Rock stands today.

But he is not really talking about that literal geographical spot. He is talking about an idea. The mountain he is talking about is the opposite of the Valley of War and the Valley of Hell. It is rather the symbol of another possibility for humanity.

## New Possibility

For on that mountain, a new possibility comes into focus. **“They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more.”**

The promise is that no more shall the tools of this world be beaten out of shape and used for mutual slaughter. The war machine will no longer claim the bodies of our youth to feed its insatiable appetite. The tools will be repurposed to what they were always meant for, to till the land and to build up the strength of our families.

That is the promise of the mountain. It is not a particular place. If it were a place – if it were that particular mountain in Jerusalem which, to this very day, remains a piece of land that people are willing to fight and kill for, that would only lead us back to the Valley of Hell, where we cannot escape eternal conflict. It is the idea of a mountain where we can seek another possibility.

## Our Choice

And my point today is simply this. Both of those calls are there in the Bible. We have the call of Joel, who calls us to the Valley of Jehoshaphat and to use all of the creative power of this world to slaughter one another. But we also have the call of Micah, who calls us to the mountain where we can use the creative power of this world to build up our families, where war is so unthinkable that we don’t even need to learn how to do it anymore.

The Bible lays both of those possibilities before us. God lays both of those possibilities before us. The message is clear, isn’t it? We must choose which call we are going to answer. Will we go to the valley, or will we go to the mountain?

The fact that both of those prophecies are there in the Bible is important. That tells us that neither is inevitable. We are not fated to go to either the valley or the mountain. It is up to us to choose. That is the reason that the calls of both of these prophets have been preserved for us. But which one will we listen to?

## The Lure of the Valley

The answer should be obvious. The devastation of the valley is clear. Yes, there are deeds of bravery there. Yes, there is much heroism there that we can celebrate. But the wastefulness of the

valley is terrible. It sucks up so many plowshares and pruning hooks that are meant to be used so that the earth may thrive. We should choose the mountain.

But we also know that humanity has chosen the valley again and again throughout its bloody history. In fact, the valley is often the easier choice. It is easier to be led by the desire to dominate, the impulse to hate someone because they are different and the thirst to possess the land.

## Judgement and Arbitration

So, if the valley is constantly drawing us in, how can we choose the mountain instead? Well, Micah tells us what it will take. He tells us that it takes the hard work of judgement and arbitration. **“He shall judge between many peoples and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away.”** In the Bible, judgement and arbitration always include the hard choice to not simply defer to one party because they are strongest or wealthiest.

Too often in our world, we look at the party that has the most weapons or the most economic leverage, and we decide that it is easier to let them have their way.

If we let Russia have land in Ukraine because they want it or if we let Israel build luxury resorts in the Gaza Strip because we don't want to challenge them, that is not judgement. That is simply a way of bowing to tyranny and it will always and inevitably lead us right back into the valley.

## Sharing of Resources

The second thing that Micah says will draw us to the mountain is this: **“They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.”** That is the key promise that God gave to the ancient people of Israel. And it is a simple one.

It is a symbol of having enough. If you were able to sit underneath your vine as it produced your grapes and your fruit tree as it produced your figs, you had enough.

What it is not, however, is an image of inordinate wealth and prosperity because if everyone has their own vine and fig tree, then there are no huge disparities of wealth between the rich and the poor. It is not that I get one fig tree to sit under and Elon Musk gets a trillion.

What then do we need to construct on the mountain? We need to construct a more egalitarian society. We need to offer ways to those who have more to share it.

## The Dangers of Inequality

What, do you suppose, does that have to do with peace and with making sure that the swords get beaten into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks? Much more than you may think. At its root, so much of the violence of this world is driven by that deep drive to have more than somebody else.

And it is often those who are seeking to build up their investments and turn their profits who drive us into the wars, though they are not the ones who fight them. They are only too happy to let the poor peasants beat their pruning hooks into spears and their plowshares into swords.

The choice for this world could not be starker. Will we go to the valley or will we go to the mountain? Let us pray, and let us work our way towards the mountain. Let us not give in to the strong pull of the valley. The ancient prophets of Israel understood the choice. I hope we do too.