Welcome, to Forest Hills Church, whether you are here with us in person or joining us online, we are so glad you are here. My name is Cassi Betker, I am the Director of Youth Ministries. Our Senior Pastor David is on vacation for the next two Sundays, which means this Sunday you get me and next Sunday our Associate Pastor Andrew will be giving the message.

Memory Verse Slide:

This week our memory Verse comes from Psalms. Let’s read this together. Please stand and proclaim his mighty acts in worship today.

“Sing praises to the Lord, who lives in Zion! Proclaim his mighty acts among all people!” Psalm 9:11.

MESSAGE-

SLIDE 1:

What is Zion? Scripture: Isaiah Isaiah 51:1-4, 11,15-16

SLIDE 2:

What do you think of when you hear “Zion”? One of the things that came to mind right away for me was some of the worship songs, like the ones we sang today, with the word Zion in it. Some of you may think of the many old hymns that mention Zion. Or maybe you have heard of towns named Zion or Mount Zion. It was even made popular in the “Matrix” movies as the safe place for humans to hide from the machines. Or maybe, if you love studying your Bible, you are thinking of the name of a small mountain in Jerusalem. But, what is Zion? I am happy to say there are others who have had the same question. So I did a bit of research.

SLIDE 3:

The word *Zion* occurs over 150 times in the Bible. The word *Zion* is also used in a physical and spiritual sense in Scripture. Let's begin back where the word is used for the first time in the Bible in 2 Samuel 5:7. It says of David, "The king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites . . . [and] David took the stronghold of Zion, that is, the city of David." So from the time of David, Zion was synonymous with the city of David. What begins to make this place so significant is that immediately David brings the ark of the covenant into this stronghold of Zion. The ark of the covenant was the sacred seat of the holy of holies where God met his people in the tabernacle. So Zion becomes the center of worship and a place of God's presence. And when Solomon moves the arc of the covenant into the temple that he had built on MountZion (1 Kings 8:1), the whole of Jerusalem came to be known as Zion. Most of the time "Zion" refers to the city of Jerusalem, not just as another name, but because it is the city of God's presence and the city of great hope for God's people. The image of Zion was an important one in the Old Testament. It was an image of God’s presence and strength and comfort. It was also recognized as Jerusalem, the place in which God made His presence, His power and authority, known to the world. It was an image of hope for the people of Israel.

SLIDE 4:

As the Bible progresses, the word *Zion* expands in scope and takes on an additional, spiritual meaning. So Zion meant the place where God was present and near to his people. But that's not all. It follows that Zion became the place from which the people expected help. Zion became the source of deliverance and salvation. For example,

* Psalm 20:2, "May the Lord send you help from the sanctuary, and give you support from Zion!"
* Psalm 3:4, "I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy hill"—that is, Mount Zion.

So Zion was the place of God's special presence among his people. Though God is omnipresent, meaning he is everywhere, the Holy Spirit was not yet living in each believer. He would meet the priests of that time in the temple. The temple had a veil that guarded the people from accessing the Ark of the Covenant and coming into the presence of God. They didn’t have Jesus yet to take away their sins so God was available at the temple. The temple became the place that the people knew God would be anytime they needed Him. Let’s go back to Zion and see how this changed.

SLIDE 5:

See there is more to Zion than just a place. In Isaiah 51:3 it says “For the Lord comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.” This verse refers to the transformation of Zion. The image of Zion here is not of just a place, but a people. Isaiah 51:16, goes on to say “And I have put my words in your mouth and covered you in the shadow of my hand, establishing the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth, and saying to Zion, ‘You are my people.’” Not just any people but the Lord’s people. Those the Lord loves.

SLIDE 6:

As we move into the New Testament we see the prophecy fulfilled in Jesus. The Old Testament prophecy states out of the line of David will come the Savior. Peter, quoting [Isaiah 28:16](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa%2028.16), refers to Christ as the [Cornerstone](https://www.gotquestions.org/Jesus-Christ-cornerstone.html) of Zion: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame” ([1 Peter 2:6](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Pet%202.6)). Christ is the cornerstone of our salvation, our faith and the church. Friends, this is the gospel. What God is saying to Jerusalem He is also saying to all of us. He loves us. He values us. He wants to welcome and restore us, and give us hope for a bright future – not because we deserve it but because that’s the kind of God He is.

God’s people, you who are Zion, are also the church. Now we usually refer to ourselves as Forest Hills Church. We don't regularly refer to ourselves as Zion, but as we come to understand the word Zion, we see it is the people of God, the church. Now I need to stop here and define the church a bit more. When most people hear the word church they probably think of a building. Maybe it is a fancy building or a simple building where believers gather. But biblically speaking, a church is much more than a building. In fact, some would say that the church is not a building at all, but is all about the people. When speaking of the church, theologians often use terms such as the visible or local church and they speak of the invisible or universal church. The visible local church is, of course, the physical churches that we see around us and around the world, as well as the members of those churches. The invisible and universal church, however, refers to all believers everywhere and is one church, united in Christ. The other thing we see here is that the church is something that no one but God can build. We can't build the church. As both a physical and invisible church there's nothing we can do to make it successful. But our Americanized idea of success—even success in churches -- equals bigger sanctuaries, sound booths, daycare centers and multi-million dollar building projects. Churches became communities in and of themselves—within the wider community, but not with the community. When we follow a biblical model, we can see that little time was spent worrying about where to meet and what accoutrements would attract the right kind of crowd. Disciples met in public squares and people’s homes to evangelize and fellowship with other believers. They were out in the community, forming relationships, and being the church.I believe there is a call to return to the roots of Christianity. In this time of quarantine and social distancing and online church this in the community model is so important. Our space is limited, every other row is roped off and we can only be at half capacity. So where are the people going to be? In their neighborhoods. We need to bring the message to the people personally, not hope they catch our YouTube channel.

SLIDE 7:

The next question then is what do we do? We aren't here as a physical church for over 50 years because we followed the right formula. God is the One who builds His church in both people and buildings. Let’s take a two minute detour here. This sentence does not mean that we don’t have to do anything, that God will just make it happen. It also doesn’t mean that we don’t have a job to do. God has put you here within this church for a reason. God gifts believers to serve and build up the kingdom of believers. We have to take time to vision, plan and implement. The kind of church we need to build is a church that allows that relationship with God, that intimate partnership to develop and flourish. We do this when we create opportunity and space to gather to worship and pray, and we allow the spirit of God to move as we minister to one another and the community

There's no tool or method that we can invent to make the Gospel or the church appear wise in the eyes of the world, nor do we want to. We can't be a church that people look at and say, “That looks like a pretty reasonable religion. I want to go over and have that.” We’re talking about a way of life that is foolishness to the world and it's what has to be the heart of our life as a church. And we won't be here another 50 years from now if that's not how we live, if that's not our priority, if God's Word is not what shapes us, if we don't teach our children to hold God's Word high above all else and love the Savior that is proclaimed there. This is the hope we have — to hold up God's Word, to raise up men, women, and children who proclaim God's Word. In the Bible, church is always a reference to people, not a place. The church is a body of believers that live out the Gospel in their words and actions. The church is at its best when people inside the building take Jesus’ message outside the building and serve those they meet. Yes, we need to proclaim it at church to one another; but we also need to proclaim it in our workplaces: as we take our kids to play baseball or soccer; as we go wherever the Lord takes us we should be proclaiming His Word because we are Zion and He has established us and so He is the One who deserves all the glory. I know that it is easy for me to say, “go out and share the Gospel” I work here. People expect me to share the Gospel. But my need to share the message is one is one of the reasons I transitioned to ministry work as a second career. The message became too important in my life to keep quiet about. We are here for such a limited time and that person living next to you, or the one in the cube next to yours needs to hear the message. Not all of us are called into ministry but we are all called to share about God’s grace and salvation.

SLIDE 8:

When we share God’s story we tell others about a transformation in our lives. We share about the hope that we have. Isaiah 51:4 says "Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations.” We, Zion, are that light to the nations. This passage in Isaiah shows us that the ultimate goal of the church, God’s people, at the end of the day, is to spread the hope that we have in heaven. It's a hope that we're looking forward to. The power of the Gospel brings us salvation but it's not just a few words written down on a piece of paper or a magic formula that somebody shares. It's God's Spirit working through His Word to transform hearts. That teaches people His ways, and the only place that is found is in Zion, His church. Not the church as in these four walls but as the people of God. If we as the church don't love and teach and proclaim God's Word, no one else will do it. People come to Zion, they come to the church, to find what is found nowhere else. And don't forget, Jesus, as He prepared to go into Jerusalem in that last week, He said, “If they don't worship Me, the stones will cry out.” Christ will be worshiped, God will be proclaimed, and the church is what He uses to do that. We are a people who are to teach and preach the Word of God. We are a people of hope because of the mercy of the Lord. We have a hope and a future and need not be terrified anymore because of Jesus. We are Zion.

SLIDE 9:

As a result of His salvation that He has worked in us, we are to be a people, a church, we are to be Zion. We are His, what hope that is for us. We are not left in the sin and wondering how we will ever make it. We are promised to be God’s own people, won by the blood of Jesus. Through God's people, the church, He teaches His ways. It's the only place where the truth is. Anybody who wants to know about God, ends up going to church, or at least church in the broader sense, they need to hear His Word spoken by God’s people. And so it's where they turn. It's to the church of the living and loving God. We are to proclaim the Word to tell the story of God's salvation. God is the One who builds His church. We are not just Forest Hills Church but we are also Zion, God’s people saved by His grace. Because of this we have to have a passion for seeing God's Word proclaimed among us, we have to have a passion for proclaiming God's Word to ourselves, we have to have a passion for holiness that only God's Word can produce in us. We’re living a life that is founded on the Word, that cannot be founded on any human wisdom, that cannot be looking wise to the world.

The effects of salvation in our life is that we will be transformed. No longer will our passions be to accomplish comforts and find success in life. It's not that God won't bring us many of these things. But our ultimate joy and our final hope will be in seeing Christ glorified, in seeing Him lifted above all else, in seeing the mountain of the house of the Lord lifted up as the highest mountain, as God is glorified for what He has done among us because we're remembering there is a sovereign God. He is the One who has established Zion. He is the One who has done this work in us and for us. He is the One who has transformed us. He is the One who has drawn us to Him. What Scriptures call us to is that He must increase and we must decrease. That doesn't mean that we want to see Him increase but we’d like to stay right where we are because we're very comfortable right now. That means we live lives actively seeing God promoted and ourselves actually demoted.

SLIDE 10: As we promote God, we share an eternal hope, which is the final Zion. Revelation 14:1 states “Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion” John sees the Lamb, referring to Christ standing on Mount Zion. In other words, it is a promise that God would use David’s kingdom “Mount Zion” to bring the kingdom of God to earth. Next time you sing the old hymn “Marching to Zion” we can now visualize where we are marching to, an eternal home with Jesus. This New Jerusalem, New Zion, will be far more than an improved version of ancient or modern Jerusalem. It will be a heavenly city that exists on an entirely new earth along with a new heaven. There the Lord Himself will dwell in perfect peace and unity with those who are children of God. This brings us full circle with Zion being the dwelling place of God.

SLIDE 11:

Zion is a place, it is a people, and it is a concept of hope. I would like to leave you with one last image of which returns us back to the physical place, the mount on which Jerusalem was built, the very place Jesus paid the price for us. You see just outside the city walls of “Zion'' Jesus was crucified for us. He hung on a tree, took all our sin and brokenness that the Law showed us so clearly, and died in our place. He bore the wrath of God for our lives not being holy and perfect. And now we can come to Mount Zion, the heavenly city through Jesus. His life for us. He mediates for us. He is our Lord and Savior. And we await too, the true Zion, our real and final heavenly home. Until we march to that final Zion we are called to spread the light of salvation to the nations. To be Zion. Zion – a wonderful word filled with so much meaning. Zion, the hope we have in Jesus.

Just a reminder next week, Pastor David will be on vacation and Pastor Andrew will be giving the message. We also have youth group this wednesday night and Community Care next weekend. As we leave let me finish with this prayer.

*Heavenly Father, I pray that as we continue from this day forward to hear Your Word proclaimed, that Lord, it will continue to transform us and transform our lives even as it has already done. Lord, I pray you would give us a passion to give You glory and share the word with those around us. Remind us we are Zion. Amen.*