We continue in our Advent sermon series, titled “Hope,” as we get closer and closer to Christmas Day. And if you’ve been with us the past two weeks, you’ll remember that what we’re doing as we look ahead to Christ’s birth in Bethlehem is trying our best to embrace an underlying theme for this season of the year, namely that in Advent, there is a looking ahead, and that’s exciting, but it’s not just cheery news in a cheery season. The coming of Christ was the fulfillment of centuries of longing on the part of the people of Israel, and we see that throughout the story and Scripture of Israel, everything that should have been or could have been finds redemption in Christ Jesus, throughout the Old Testament, and not just hopes and dreams, but the fulfillment and restoration of all the letdowns and failures evident in the Old Testament as well. And that’s why the hope of Advent is more than cheery news in a cheery time of year. It is desperate news in our darkest hour. And so, each week we’ve been coming to a dark hour in the story of Israel and how conveys, even if only implicitly, a longing for restoration, a restoration we see in Christ Jesus. Two weeks ago we went to a season of betrayal in Isaiah 7, last week to Psalm 57 and David’s seeking shelter from the storm, from the king Saul, and this week in Psalm 74, we see in the background nothing less than the charred ruins of the house of God itself. Will you pray with me?

Almighty God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Over the past few years, I’ve spent a bit of time in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for some academic work. Came to really enjoy the city, but one thing struck me there that I think is more and more often the case in other cities: abandoned churches. There’s one old church, built back in the 1800s as the city expanded and industry grew, called St. John’s the Baptist, or at least it used to be called that. Due to declining numbers and budgets, about 25 years ago the Catholic Diocese closed that parish, and the building was vacant.

Not too long afterward, though, the building had another owner, but not another church. A small business emerged there, and they renovated the church, turning it into a brewery and restaurant, now called Church Brew Works. And it was one of my favorite places to go in the city. The restaurant was just the old sanctuary. They had taken pews and repurposed them as seating around tables. Instead of a chancel, that’s the fancy word we use for the part that’s raised up at the front, there was a bar. And instead of a choir, there are huge fermenting tanks. Really cool space. And I know what some of you are thinking: Jay, we can keep the choir, but if we could move you and put a bar up here instead, that’d be alright.

Honestly, I think that was part of the allure to the place, because you could go and have a beer in church, in a way. And the beer was pretty good. The food was pretty good. But I’ll admit I always felt a bit weird sitting in there too, because enjoying a beer or two wasn’t what it was built for, and I suppose there was a bit of both fascination and sadness on my part that the space
meant to be a place of worship no longer served that function. Instead it was a restaurant, meeting in the ruins of an old church.

We have a longstanding fascination with ruins, I believe. Not just with old industrial age churches, but everywhere: Incan ruins at Macchu Picchu in Peru, Mayan ruins in the Yucatan, the entire city of Pompeii in Italy, just to name a few. There’s something about standing in what remains of a magnificent city or building or structure, something that was intended to stand for a long, long time, but now it doesn’t. It’s a visual reminder of what once was, but conveys without confusion that what once was is no longer.

In the British Museum in London, there’s a certain clay tablet from the Babylonian Empire, dated back to the 6th century BC, which incidentally is about the same time period that serves as the backdrop of this psalm. The tablet’s kind of rudimentary world map, or such as they conceived of it. On a few parts of it, it has notations about places to the far north where “the sun is never seen,” about the “bitter river,” referring to the Mediterranean Ocean, but then there’s another inscription, and it’s not exactly clear what part of the world it’s referring to, but it says, “ruined cities…watched over by their ruined gods.”

There’s no way of knowing whether the city of Jerusalem was one of the places that tablet had in mind, but it wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to say that Jerusalem certainly fit the bill, at least that’s what it would’ve looked like. The backdrop for this psalm of lament, a psalm crying out to God, is a city, the city of God, in ruins. And in this case, there’s no fascination with the ruins, only sadness.

You could probably hear it loud and clear a minute ago. The whole psalm is a plea that God would remember his people, and also that God would remember the brazen idolatry and hubris practiced by those who tore the city down. Starting in v. 1, the text reads, “O God why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago, which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage. Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell.” The singer here is crying out to God that he would remember that they were his chosen people, “the tribe of [his] heritage,” that he had chosen to dwell among them. Note though, that it’s all past tense, because for the singer, it doesn’t feel like God is there anymore. Feels like the Babylonian inscription of a “ruined city, watched over by a ruined god,” might start to sound more and more plausible.

Here’s what happened. Really one of the worst ordeals in all of Israel’s history. About 400 years after King David, who we talked about last week, Israel is teetering and divided. And they have to contend with a new power on the rise in the 6th century BC: Babylon.

Babylon expands under the king Nebuchadnezzar. And after taking Jerusalem once and installing a puppet king, the Israelis rebel, so Babylon came back with its whole army, and this time, when they took the city again, they captured the king, killed all his sons in front of him, put out his eyes, and took him captive on to Babylon along with much of the population. Bible’s got some messed up stuff in it, y’all.

Then, they summarily burn the Temple down, that along with all the great houses of the city and for good measure tearing down all the city walls. That’s what the psalm is talking about when it says, starting in v. 3, “Your foes have roared within your holy place; they set up their emblems there. At the upper entrance they hacked the wooden trellis with axes. And then, with hatchets and hammers, they smashed all its carved work. They set your sanctuary on fire; they desecrated the dwelling place of your name, bringing it to the ground.” This is the destruction of Jerusalem, of the holy city, of the city of David.
And if you were part of the people that were left there, your life was lived out among the rubble of the city: the population decimated by siege and captivity, the skilled labor and leadership of the city taken away, yourself left vulnerable because the city’s walls are broken down, and by far worst of all, the Temple is burned to the ground. A ruined city, watched over by its ruined god—that’s what it would feel like at least.

The reason this chapter in Israel’s history is one of its darkest isn’t just because of the Babylonian conquest, sure that’s a big part of it, but it struck at the very heart of the people of Israel—how they saw themselves, how they saw God, how they saw their relationship to God. And a huge component of that relationship centered on the Temple itself. For Israel, it wasn’t just a structure, wasn’t even just a holy place for worship. For Israel, the Temple was God’s house. That was where God lived, where he had chosen to dwell. The Temple was the constant reminder for Israel that the God who had delivered them from Israel, the God who had chosen them to be a blessed people in his name, lived right there with them.

So if the Temple is destroyed, especially by a foreign power, and nothing happens against them, then it’s an indication that something is very, very wrong. Either it means that God can’t do anything about it; God won’t do anything about it; or God was never there in the first place.

All that’s left, then, is just ruins, and there was no telling how long it would stay that way.

I mentioned last week that in any group, 10% of that group would be actively in a crisis right now. Kind of changes the way you look at groups of people. But that statistic was only half the story. 10% of any group is actively in a crisis right now, but 50% of any group is recovering from one. To put in terms of the psalm today, for 10% of us, the walls are tumbling down right now, but for half of us, we’re still sitting in the rubble. And in a lot of ways, that can be just as painful. Because when you’re in the rubble, that’s just the way things are now, without hope of things ever changing.

I knew two brothers about my age at my old church in Memphis who endured a pretty jarring and tragic sequence of events. First they found out that their parents’ marriage was falling apart, but shortly thereafter, their father was given a terminal diagnosis with an advanced stage of cancer, and as he was dying they were trying to hold things together as a family. Then sadly, after their father passed, within months their mother was also diagnosed with cancer and passed away herself.

So within a year, these two brothers went from thinking one thing about their parents to thinking another thing, then within that swirl of everything they were caring for both of their parents as they passed away, until finally after it was all over and the dust settles, they found themselves in a very different world than the one they knew a year prior. What they had grounded their lives on, what they had relied on, was torn down and gone. Now they only saw the ruins of what used to be but was no longer. And that was the way things were, the new normal.

And I think coming to grips with the way things are, without hope of things changing, is in many ways just as painful as the crisis itself. Folks have shared with me over and over that the most difficult time in grieving the loss of a loved one, for example, isn’t always the immediate aftermath of someone’s passing, but rather a month from then, or two months from then, or six months from then, after the dust settles and you’re reminded in even the littlest things, that he or she isn’t with you anymore, and that’s the way things are.
And when we’re in that place, when we’re in the ruins, when we’re in the rubble of what once was but is no longer, it can be a hopeless place, because the crisis has passed. This is how it is now, and there’s no sign of it ever changing.

That’s what the singer grappled with in the psalm. Yes, when the walls came down it was incredibly painful, but just as painful was sitting in the ruins of the house of God, and not seeing any sign of things ever changing. In v. 9, it says, “We do not see our emblems; there is no longer any prophet, and there is no one among us who knows how long. How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?” Saying there’s no word from the Lord that this present rubble, the ruins they sit in, would ever change, would ever get better, no sign that, as the enduring symbol of God’s presence with them, the Temple itself, was torn down and gone, God would be with them again.

But then the psalm takes a turn. The final verse of the text we read, and this tone continues through the end of the psalm, in v. 12, it says, “Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the earth.” The faith here just floors me. Out of the rubble, out of the ruins of what once was but is no longer comes this statement of faith “Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the earth.” The message here is that the Lord plays the long game, and that is cause for hope, even in the ruins.

And we’re blessed to see in the story and Scripture of the people of Israel, how that long game plays out. While in this psalm, there is a hopelessness at first, God where are you, when will this change, and while there is a turn to faith and to hope, there’s still no sign for the singer here how things actually would change. No sign for the singer that God would be with them again.

But we know different. We know that even though the walls come down and we see no immediate sign of things changing, the Lord plays the long game. And if the walls have come down around you, and you see no sign of God, no sign of hope, the Lord has a tendency of rebuilding in ways we don’t expect. We know that even though the Temple would eventually be rebuilt and stood again centuries later during the time of a young engaged couple from Nazareth, that a new Temple wasn’t God’s answer. God’s answer was a child born in a manger in Bethlehem, who would go on to say, “Tear down this Temple, and in three days I will build it again.” God’s answer to the ruins of the Temple wasn’t another Temple, but a child, Immanuel, God with us.