

Prisoners of Hope (A Sermon for Proper 9A)

St. Mary's Episcopal Church (Cypress, Texas)

Zechariah 9:9-12

July 9, 2017

Zechariah is a book that people evidently don't preach from much. There's surprisingly little commentary about it. In the lectionary we hear from it exactly once every three years, on this Sunday. But it is language we know almost by heart. The Palm Sunday Gospel readings spring immediately to mind, with Jesus coming into Jerusalem on a donkey and a colt.

In Zechariah, we are looking at a group of people who have returned to their land after they were forcibly displaced. In 586 BCE Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians and many of its people were made to leave their homes.

Then the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and 50 years later the Persian emperor allowed the Israelites to return home to Jerusalem. Not all chose to return, but those that did went back to a pretty battered and beaten city.

On top of that, the exiles' return was not exactly free and clear. That is to say that the Israelite refugees were not fully restored to their land but rather allowed to be there under Persian rule and basically used as a buffer against Persia's enemies in Egypt.

And in this context steps the prophet Zechariah saying:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!”

Your king is coming! Don't you worry. And he is going to stop all this fighting and war. You are going to know peace, because God is going to make things right. No longer prisoners of war, but rather prisoners of hope.

Prisoners...of hope.

That is what caught me. The cognitive dissonance, the competing images those words pull from me made me stop. What does it mean to be a prisoner of hope?

It is hard to define in part, I think, because we tend to use the word “hope” very loosely.

“I hope we see fireworks...”

“I hope TCU can win the College World Series...”

“I hope they didn’t put tomato on my sandwich...”

Those are all things I have said in just the past two weeks. But in real life, having hope, living with hope, is not the stuff of firework displays, sports teams, or lunch orders. Hope isn’t the verbal equivalent of crossing your fingers.

Hope is audacious. Hope is daring. Hope is shocking. Because if you weigh pros and cons, look at all the evidence, or count the cost you will never bank on hope. It would be illogical to do so. But that is the thing about hope. Hope does not care about logic.

Because hope, true hope, real hope, deep hope is not the same as wishing or wanting. It is not the same as optimism; not in the least really. Hope comes from a much deeper place. It comes from a place of faith, one that is rooted in God's promises of justice and reconciliation.

And for Christians, our hope is tethered to the profound sadness of pain and death – the punishment of an innocent man by an empire. Our hope recognizes and remembers that it was through death that we all can know everlasting life.

It should be no surprise then that hope often comes through in difficult times.

To be a prisoner of hope then means risking the looks of people who think you are crazy for doing what you do. Last week while on vacation, I worshipped with a group of folks in Charleston, South Carolina, who lost their building, most of their congregation, and pretty much any resources they had when that diocese split a couple of years ago. They started over as 10

people, all over the age of 60, in a living room. They now worship in a funeral home...they literally have signs of death all around them. But they have hope...they are prisoners of hope.

To be a prisoner of hope means to work to change the system that has failed you again and again. In Charleston I also walked past Calvary Episcopal Church, which was founded in 1847. This was a congregation set up to minister with and to the African Americans in the city, both free and enslaved. It was a partnership with another church in town, one of the oldest and richest - and whitest. The folks who worked to start Calvary faced threats of violence and rioting, but they had hope...they were prisoners of hope.

Sister Joan Chittister, in one of the deepest faith-forming and hope-imprisoning books in my library, writes:

Hope is not a matter of waiting for things outside us to get better. It is about getting better inside.... it is about allowing ourselves to believe in the future we cannot see ... about trusting in God.... then we can hope because we have no reason to hope. Hope is what sits by a window and waits for one more dawn, despite the fact that there isn't an ounce of proof in tonight's black, black sky that it can possibly come.... Hope is the last great gift to rise out of the grave of despair.

Hope doesn't make any sense. In fact, hope defies all sense. Hope is what can say that the world will be made right. Hope is what can say that the dead will live again.

In our Gospel today Jesus tells his followers to take his yoke upon them. Jesus yokes us, Jesus burdens us, not with the burdens of the world. But maybe, just maybe, the burden of hope.

Amen.