

Sea to Shining Sea

Zechariah 9:9-12

Good morning and good 4th of July weekend! I pray that your holiday was peaceful and filled with family activities. For me this weekend was a joyful one. As many of you know husband Leroy has been in and out the hospital for the past two weeks. The heart special did a heart cauterization on June 24 and stated that there were no blockages. I went to Atlanta and did sign language interpreting for the Quadrennial Assembly because his physician said there was no danger. However, by Saturday night Leroy was back in the hospital because of chest pains again. Although he was sent home he returned to the hospital on Sunday night and stayed until Thursday evening. So I was especially grateful on the 4th of July because the doctors had diagnosed that he was having reactions to his medication and some anxiety issues. What I also know is that I am a member of a community of faith that holds each other in prayer and that our God is always watching and caring for us. Not only were the members of Unity praying, but my family and the chaplains of the Quadrennial assembly who prayed every morning for those of us in Atlanta, but all whom we had left at home. They even prayed for Leroy by name each morning.

In our scripture this morning Zechariah announces the coming Davidic king who rides into Jerusalem on a colt. This is part of the gradual development of a messianic expectation in Judaism. This passage also plays an important role in our Christian understanding of Jesus as the Messiah. By riding into Jerusalem on a colt just before his crucifixion, Jesus not only announced himself as Messiah, but also invites us to look

into a rich prophetic tradition that can help us understand what it is that the Messiah does.

In this passage, Zion is called to rejoice in the knowledge that her king is on his way. This king is described as having three important characteristics that distinguish him from other rulers. First, he is one who rules in righteousness and justice; as such, the messianic king holds within him the hope of an oppressed people. Second, he is saved by God; in other words, he rules with God's help and does not rely only on his own strength. Third, he is gentle and humble, not proud and boastful.

The characteristic of the messianic king who is gentle and humble is seen by the fact that he rides on a colt, the foal of a donkey. The donkey is indeed a humble animal, but its real significance lies in the fact that it is associated with the business of life rather than the business of death. Before the industrial revolution the donkey was the animal used on the farm to help in the production of food and in the town to carry people and goods. The donkey is very different from the horse, which at the time of our scripture was largely an animal used for war. The colt therefore symbolizes the very acts that the messianic king was to perform, according to Zechariah: taking away the chariots and warhorses and breaking the battle bows (v. 10). His arrival and the mode of his arrival announced the end of war and the beginning of a universal peace under his rule.

This vision of the messianic king is rooted in the history of God's people. The king that is to come is to be a restoration of the house of David, and his kingdom will reach as far as that of Solomon. But the history that feeds this vision is the history of God's dealings with Zion. The messianic king will rule by dependence on God. He brings God's peace instead of war. He is unlike the kings of the past, but he is also like them. He is God's "own man," and allows God to be the true ruler of the messianic kingdom.

It is in light of this that the hope that this passage is best understood. Here God is speaking, announcing the deliverance of Zion's prisoners. Like their ancestor's son,

Joseph, on his way to be sold as a slave by his brothers, Zion's lost children find themselves in a waterless pit, and were seemingly without hope. But they were prisoners of hope, because they were to be freed and restored to Zion. The messianic kingdom would not be complete until the healing of God's people.

Have we been wrong in only hearing this scripture on Palm Sunday as we explore who Jesus is? In its context of God's history with the Jewish people this passage tells us about God's message of hope and restoration, as proclaimed and embodied by Jesus. The real question that is raised by this passage is what it means for the Man from Nazareth to ride into Jerusalem on a colt before being crucified by the powers of war and oppression. This passage helps us understand what Jesus' enacting of Zechariah's vision says about God, the God whom Jesus knows intimately as his Father, and whose kingdom formed the central focus of his ministry.

The God whose rule is established by the messianic king, Zechariah tells us, is a God not of war and destruction, but of peace and restoration. As you can imagine I had plenty of rest this weekend because Leroy had to regain his strength after his latest 5-day hospital stay. I watched public television on Friday. I watched the story of the writing of "The Star Spangled Banner" which became our national anthem in 1931. I learned about the history of Lafayette and his contributions to the American Revolutionary War. I learned about Patrick Henry's famous speech that concluded with the words "give me liberty or give me death." All of these are things we celebrate as citizens of the United States of America. On the 4th of July we celebrate our freedom. On the 4th of July we celebrate that we are a nation from sea to shining sea. We are proud of our wealth and the beauty of our land. We are proud that our nation is a world leader. We as a nation are proud of our past, but there are many things that we need to repent of and work harder to resolve. We still discriminate people who came to this country without documentation, although most of our fore parents. We still have to

admit that our government tried to exterminate the native people of this county because it wanted the land and the resources for immigrants from Europe. We still need to admit that many people were force to come to the country to do the work that we did not want to do. We still have to admit that every group that finds itself on the bottom of the social ladder has to fight for their portion of the American dream whether they were the Africans; Irish; Italians; Asians; Mexicans, South Americans; even women; and now those who express their sexuality differently than most of us. We too often forget that we all came here as immigrants from other nations.

We who claim Christ as our Lord and Savior also have to remember that as proud as we are to be Americans, our loyalty must be to the God who made the heavens and the earth; the God who declares that all of us are made in the imagine of God. That it is God's breath that we breathe. Jesus' God is not a God of war. The temptation is still with us to turn Jesus' colt into a warhorse and make him serve an agenda of war and oppression. When we do that, we in fact deny any messianic identity for Jesus, for the Messiah is not a conquering hero, but a humble ruler who, fully dependent on God, bringing peace to the nations and hope to the prisoners.

This vision of "what the Messiah does" contains a certain imperative for the believer who claims to believe in Jesus as Messiah. Our priorities are wrong if the focus of our inquiry is whether Jesus is indeed the long-expected king of the Jews, whether therefore Christians are right and Jews are wrong. Such an inquiry is itself all too often an act of violence. Our priority should rather be to ask ourselves whether our lives of faith are true to the messianic vision we see enacted by Jesus. When he rode into Jerusalem on a colt, Jesus implicitly provided us, his followers, with a code to live by: a code of peace rather than war, of restoration rather than destruction, of hope rather than the despair of the pit (v. 11). **Rachel Sophia Baard**

Shortly after the destruction on 9/11 of the Twin Towers in New York City, an AP photographer shared his story. He was working the scene and trying to capture images for the nation. He tried his best to stay objective, but it was still a tragedy painfully fresh, and objectivity was simply not possible. Throughout that first week, everyone at Ground Zero was a prisoner to hope, praying that someone might be found alive. As the days passed and that hope faded, the photographer found it harder and harder to capture images of the rescue workers.

One afternoon of another cloudless day, as he walked down the sidewalk in what had once been the shadows of the towers, he glanced down. There, in the crack of the sidewalk, a dandelion poked its way into the new light. It was not anything spectacular. In fact, the image itself was quite humble. With the roar of the machines and the shouts of the rescuers only a few feet away, the photographer fell to his knees and burst into tears at the realization that life, even in such a place as this, will persist. Amid the emerging nationalistic fervor that swept the United States into war, one man found a glimpse of eschatological hope in a weed on the sidewalk. I almost wish it had been a mustard plant.

Of course, Christian eyes cannot but see Jesus on that foal, riding into Jerusalem. All four Gospels remember Zechariah's prophecy as Jesus enters the holy city, as he begins his final journey to the cross. In reflecting on Zechariah's final promise—a restoration of double what was lost (v. 12). It is in Jesus that we too are restored doubly: we are restored in life, and we are restored in death. In Christ Jesus the promise of victory and triumph is not only about the wars we face with the powers of this world; we are promised victory over the ultimate enemy, death itself. Such a victory and such a promise are not a denial of death's reality; if it were, there would be no need for hope.

There are far too many among us who feel trapped in their "waterless pits" (v. 11). For years, someone very dear to me has wrestled with a drug addiction. When he is at

his worst, he is at the very bottom of that pit. Slowly but surely, he begins to claw his way back out, but he knows the slightest slip can send him sprawling back to the bottom again. It is a chorus bracketed by merciless repeat bars, one which he sings over and over and over again. In the worst moments, the promise of new life seems too distant. He feels too guilty, too unworthy to claim the covenant.

Zechariah's promise is in the plural: it is for those who are imprisoned and those who long for the prisoners' release. It is a promise of restoration, of wholeness. As children of the covenant, we yoke our hearts to the promise of such new life, and we live for its realization: the new Jerusalem, indeed, even the new Flint; the new Michigan; the United States of America. **Trace Haythorn**

At the Quadrennial Assembly our theme was “I see you.” We explored how to see each other through eyes of grace; through the voice of compassion; through the hands of justice; with a heart of joy. I see you whole. As we live our lives in relationship with the Prince of Peace; we need to seek ways to share God’s love and grace to all we meet, from sea to shining sea. His is a reign of compassion and love for all people, not by force and war; but by justice and peace. Be thankful that God allows you to be an American; but be even more grateful that God allows you to be Christian.

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