

Sermon Proper 9A, Track 2

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https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp9_RCL.html

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Zechariah 9:9-12

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim

and the war horse from Jerusalem;

and the battle bow shall be cut off,

and he shall command peace to the nations;

his dominion shall be from sea to sea,

and from the river to the ends of the earth.

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,

I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;

today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Romans 7:15-25a

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So, I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Jesus said to the crowd, "To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Today's first lesson, from the prophet Zechariah may sound vaguely familiar to some of you...and perhaps also vaguely out of place.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! (The prophet declares)

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

If you are familiar with this passage at all, it's probably as it is quoted in the Gospels we read each year on Palm Sunday. In the context of Holy Week, Christians read this text in reference to Jesus's final entry into Jerusalem, when he rides into the city on donkey, and is met with waving branches and shouts of "Hosanna!" and acclamations of jubilation and joy.

The second half of the passage is perhaps less familiar to us, but it is certainly no less beautiful:

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the river to the ends of the earth.
As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.
Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;
today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope.

That single phrase has caught hold of my heart and imagination.

If I have to be a prisoner of anything, I want to be a prisoner of hope.

If we, the Church, the People of God have to be prisoners of anything, I want us to be prisoners of hope.

To be a prisoner of despair may be unpleasant, even miserable, but it's also easy. It's easy to be a prisoner of despair. It is easy to be a prisoner of cynicism. It is easy to be a prisoner of fear, or greed, or pride, or anxiety, or insecurity or judgment, or comparison, or competition, or consumerism or capitalism. To use the old-fashioned language of our brother St. Paul, it is easy to be a prisoner of sin.

But to be a prisoner of hope—that is no easy sentence to fulfill.

To be a prisoner of hope requires that we remain engaged and connected and responsible. It means that we must continually wait and watch for, we must continually seek and work for the coming of God's preferred and promised kingdom of freedom and flourishing, God's reign of justice and peace in every time, in every place, in every person, no matter how distant or impossible or unlikely the realization of that promise might seem.

And if the realization of God's promised future of freedom and flourishing, of justice and peace, seems unlikely to you, that's because it absolutely is. It is entirely unlikely. Like most of God's Action in this world. Hope isn't grounded in probability. Hope is grounded in promise.

The original audience of Zechariah's prophecy was sustained by their hope for the cessation of violence and aggression against their people and their homeland. Their deepest hope was for the promised Peace, the Shalom of God. Their deepest hope was for the coming of a King who, once and for all,

would cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
that the battle bow would be cut off,
and he would command peace to the nations;
That his dominion would be from sea to sea,
and from the river to the ends of the earth.

Realistically speaking, the coming of a King of Israel, in splendor and might, with wealth and weapons and warhorses sufficient to hasten the cessation of war and aggression and command peace among the nations was unlikely enough. The coming of a King of Israel, humble and mounted on a donkey, who would herald the cessation of violence and the advent of peace with NO wealth or weapons or warhorses was practically impossible.

But here's the divine hook that catches hold of us and renders us prisoners of hope... "practically" impossible is not the same thing as "utterly" impossible.

“Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the Lord of hosts? (In Zechariah chapter 8 verse 6)

Casting aside, for a moment, the familiar hooks of cynicism and fear and doubt and despair that so often snag us, I dare you to really ask yourself:

What is your deepest hope—for our planet? For the nations of the world? For our nation?

What is your deepest hope—for our city? For our church? For our children?

What is your deepest hope—for your family? For your enemies? For yourself?

“Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the Lord of hosts? (Zechariah 8:6)

Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;

In today’s Gospel, Jesus says to his listeners:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

I believe that the yoke Jesus invites his followers to take upon themselves is the very yoke that renders us “prisoners of hope.”. Though, contrary to Jesus’ claim, I’d say this yoke isn’t entirely easy, and it isn’t entirely light. It is, after all a yoke. God’s yoke of hope does constrain our freedom—it constrains our freedom to despair; it constrains our freedom give up; it constrains our freedom to “go it alone”. God’s yoke of hope does bind us together to share in labor, it binds us to labor with God and each other, towards the redemption and reconciliation and recreation of all things. The yoke of hope is NOT easy, but it is infinitely lighter and more bearable and more productive than the yokes of shame, despair, cynicism, judgment, and fear it replaces.

Practically speaking, I believe the yoke of hope compels us to replace our “never’ with God’s “not yet.”

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When St. Paul laments (in today’s Epistle) I can will what is right, but I cannot do it as prisoners of hope we are compelled to add “yet”.

When Jesus laments (in today’s Gospel)

“[That the people] ...are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;

we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

As prisoners of hope we are compelled to add “yet”.

When we ourselves lament (in our everyday lives)

That neither our religious leaders nor our political leaders can seem to effectively negotiate peace

Or feed the hungry

Or combat climate change

Or eliminate poverty

Or address racism

When we lament

That we ourselves cannot seem to

Reign in our addictions

Or pray as we ought

Or forgive our enemies

Or love our neighbors

as prisoners of hope we’re compelled to add “yet”.

If you’re not sure what it looks like to be a prisoner of hope, just look at the icons, the people all around you.

Ramona has not been able to secure stable, satisfactory housing—yet. But she just keeps on working to find a suitable home. She is a prisoner of hope.

The staff at Marcel’s new group home have not all learned how to respond appropriately to his unique gifts and needs—yet. But he and his mom just keep trying to teach them. Marcel and his family are prisoners of hope.

As citizens in a global community, we have not succeeded in putting an end to torture and other human rights abuses—yet. But today’s special guest, Isabel, along

with her coworkers and volunteers at WINGS work every day to help survivors of torture and their families heal and thrive. They are prisoners of hope.

Return to your stronghold, (the prophet declares)

Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope

But where, we might ask, is the stronghold for the prisoners of hope? Where can we retreat to be fortified; to receive the strength and inspiration and nourishment that sustains us? Where else but here in the community of faith? Where else but here among other prisoners of hope, with fellow members of the body of Christ? Where else but here, in prayer and worship, gathered around this Eucharistic Table?

God says to God's people, through the prophet, Zechariah:

As for you also,

because of the blood of my covenant with you,

I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

Just as God made a Covenant with the people of Israel,

And set them free from the waterless pit

And made them prisoners of hope,

So through the new Covenant in Christ's Blood

God sets us free from the waterless pit

And makes us the prisoners of hope

Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;

today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people. Amen.

