

March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday

Zechariah 9:9-12 "Prisoners of Hope"

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Prisoners of hope -- that's a rather menacing sermon title for Palm Sunday, isn't it? ***Prisoners of hope*** sounds like a Lutheran Harry Potter movie. Sounds like a youth group lock-in gone awry. ***Prisoners of hope*** sounds like a title some of our Confirmation students might come up with, since they're held captive and tormented for a whole hour every Wednesday night here at Hope.

Actually, that phrase, ***prisoners of hope***, is from our Old Testament lesson, Zechariah 9. Maybe you caught it a few minutes ago.

Zechariah was a prophet. He was a mouthpiece God used to speak to his people, 500 years before Christ was born. God told Zechariah to give a message of hope to his people back then. And, man, did they need hope! Years before, their nation had been crushed by enemies. Most of the people had been taken into captivity in Babylon. Now, after years of imprisonment, they had been set free. They returned to their own land, but it was an impoverished, desolate ruin. A horribly difficult rebuilding process was ahead of them. They were discouraged, disheartened. It was almost as if they were imprisoned, again, by despair.

And in this troubled moment, Zechariah shares God's message of hope. He gives the people a specific, potent reason to have hope for their future. But then he tells them how to hang on to that hope, how to maintain their hope even in their challenging present circumstances.

And that's the hard part, really, isn't it? Living in hope every day. Maintaining hope no matter what's going on around you.

As Christians, we believe in God. We know Jesus loves us. We have the hope of heaven down the road, in the distant future. But hanging on to hope today? Keeping hope strong every day? That's a major challenge.

Because Christians like us aren't free from any of the hardships and pains of this world. We have to deal with sickness, disease, heartaches, anxieties, old age, finances, school shootings, family struggles, politics, and North Carolina weather, just like everybody else.

We may have faith, but it's hard keeping the faith all the time. We may have hope, but it's tough for us to hang on to hope, to maintain hope, to be hope-filled all the time.

But Zechariah tells us today, it's not up to us to do that. It's not up to you to find a way to pump up your hope every day, and keep it strong. Zechariah shows us where real hope comes from.

First, he points his people to a future day, when they'll have a specific, powerful reason to hope. He says, "Rejoice! Shout! Sing! For your king is coming to you! He's righteous, and he's bringing salvation. But your Messiah, your Savior, is humble, and he'll come to you riding on a donkey."

And that prophecy came true in Jesus, didn't it? Jesus rode into Jerusalem humbly. And the crowd went crazy for him. Their hopes were sky-high. Because they were thinking that Jesus was coming to restore Israel's glory days. They were hoping that the miracle-worker Jesus was going to raise up an army and smack down their Roman oppressors.

But the real story of Palm Sunday is that Jesus was coming to suffer and die for their sins, and the sins of the whole world. Jesus was coming to sacrifice himself for them, and for us. So their soaring Palm Sunday hopes came crashing down quickly, and by Friday (Good Friday) they turned against Jesus completely.

Keeping hope strong is hard. But Zechariah reminds us today that it's not up to us. Zechariah first pointed us to Christ, who came to give us real hope, the hope of forgiveness and eternal salvation. And next he shows us how we can live every day with hope – with a powerful, deep, palpable sense of security, safety, and peace. In fact, Zechariah says, we can even be **prisoners of hope**. That is, captive to hope, controlled and motivated by hope, surrounded and supported daily by hope.

How can we be **prisoners of hope**? Let's look closely at verses 11 and 12.

Verse 11 says (and this is God speaking to his disheartened people), *"Because of the blood of my covenant with you ..."* That's the covenant established on Mt. Sinai, the agreement ratified by the blood of sacrifices, foreshadowing the atoning blood of Christ.

"Because of the blood of my covenant with you," God says, *"I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit."* The people back in Zechariah's day had been set free from their imprisonment in Babylon. But now that they were home, Satan was trying to imprison them again in a pit of disappointment and unbelief. So here's where Zechariah's prophecy delivers real hope.

Verse 12: *“Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope.”*

Return to your stronghold. There it is. There's the key.

Throughout their history, the stronghold of the Israelites, their real protection, wasn't their armies, their weapons, their kings, their military alliances, or their strong city walls. The Lord God of Israel was their only Rock, their true Refuge. Whenever they relied on themselves, they failed. But when they turned in faith and humility to their God, their true stronghold, they were always safe.

And so it is now, for us. Return to your stronghold. Return to the Lord, to your omnipotent Refuge, and you will have every reason to hope. You will indeed be prisoners of hope. Not prisoners of enemy nations, or terrorist fears, or financial worries. Not prisoners of doubt and despair. Not prisoners of life's cruel, hard, unpredictable twists. ***Prisoners of hope!***

God's people, when they return to their stronghold, when they live in harmony with him, can constantly maintain an attitude of hope. Why? We're under the Lord's protection! You're guarded by God's watchful eye. You're strengthened by the Lord's abundant forgiveness and salvation. Return to your stronghold, O ***prisoners of hope!***

And what better time than today, to return to our stronghold. Take to your heart today the incredible dedication that this man riding the donkey was exhibiting toward you. He was riding toward crucifixion for you. Return to the Lord this week, and find your hope for daily living in Jesus. Ponder and appreciate on Maundy Thursday the gift of life Jesus offers you in his Holy Supper. Spend some sacred time on Good Friday and Easter Sunday recalling what Jesus really accomplished on his cross, how real and how sure is your forgiveness and your relationship with God, how positive and hopeful is your future because of the empty tomb.

Return to your stronghold this week. Return to Jesus, and let's all be ***prisoners of hope***. Amen.