

ZECHARIAH: Prisoners of Hope

Sunday, August 25, 2019

Zechariah 9:9-12

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The website *Sporcle* provides what it calls "mentally stimulating diversions," which is just a highfalutin name for trivia games! These games require you to answer a series of questions against a clock. Many of them are quite challenging.

One of the quizzes deals with peace treaties. The game tells you the year and what the treaty accomplished. Your task is to name the treaty. For example: What's the 1721 treaty that ended the Great Northern War between Sweden and Russia? The answer, of course, is the Treaty of Nystad. You already knew that, right?

If you wanted to know the names of the world's peace treaties, there'd be a lot of them to remember. *Wikipedia* has a single-spaced list of the known historic agreements, pacts, peace treaties, and major contracts between states, armies, governments, and tribal groups since 1283 BC. It requires 63 sheets of paper to print it out. The 20th century alone had 271 treaties.

The Messiah proclaims peace. What started me down this rabbit hole was reading in Zechariah about a king coming into Jerusalem riding "*on a colt, the foal of a donkey*" who will "*proclaim peace to the nations*" (v. 10). Zechariah belongs to the post-exilic period, when the remaining Jews were back in Judah, released from their captivity in Babylon. Unfortunately, they are still a subject people of the Persian Empire (the new superpower after Babylon). Yet even Persia's might did not guarantee security, and the Jews lived under the constant fear of being scattered once again if attacked by another nation. Many Jews held out the hope of one day living in a kingdom of their own under a messianic leader, but for the present, that remained a distant dream.

In that dark mood, chapter 9 begins with a prophetic word against various foreign nations, telling of God's coming judgment passing through those lands, moving from north to south. Some of the cities named in these verses have great wealth and military might, yet they are all powerless when God's judgment comes. Finally, having crushed these traditional enemies of Judah, God encamps at the temple in Jerusalem "*as a guard, so that no one shall march to and fro; no oppressor shall again overrun [Judah]*," (v. 8).

It's in that context that Zechariah calls the people in Jerusalem to "*rejoice greatly*" because their long-awaited messianic king is entering the city. This messiah arrives "*triumphant and victorious*," yet also "*humble*." The victory is peace for God's people, but this triumph is not of the king's own making: this is a peace that God's judgment on the nations makes possible. The NIV says the king will "*proclaim peace*," and the KJV says the king will "*speak peace*." The NRSV says this king will "*command peace*," which lends itself to the idea of dictating terms of a peace treaty, and seems a more appropriate rendering, since the messiah announces the peace God imposes on the nations.

The reference to this king riding on a donkey is sometimes taken as a symbol of his humility, but that misses the point. Princes and kings sometimes rode on donkeys (Judges 10:4; 2 Samuel 16:2), but kings didn't ride donkeys when going to war. For the messiah to enter the city on a donkey suggests that his is a peaceful mission.

The choice. So how does this text speak to us today? Since in its own time it was prophecy and not news, it reinforced the Jews' hope for a messiah. "One day God will subdue all our enemies and a new king from David's line will reestablish us in security and peace."

But we can imagine others who said, "The prophets have been saying that *forever*, but where's the progress? There's always war somewhere, and we have no reason to think human nature is going to suddenly change."

Perhaps we identify with that pessimistic mood more easily than with the bolstered hope. The fact that there've been so many peace treaties over the years, right down to the present day, reminds us that conflicts still arise. The idea of a whole world at peace sounds wonderful, doesn't it? The question is whether such peace is achievable given the perversity of the human heart? If it's not, then what can this Old Testament passage about a messiah announcing peace among the nations possibly have to say to us?

It tells us that we have a choice: we can either be prisoners of despair or prisoners of hope. In fact, the phrase "prisoners of hope" is right out of the Zechariah text: through the prophet, God says: "*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*" (v. 12).

In the Old Testament, "the pit" refers to Sheol, the place of the dead; but here in Zechariah, the Hebrew word is the same one used for a cistern or a water tank. It is the same word used to describe the dry pit in which Joseph's brothers imprisoned him (Genesis 37).

Zechariah was not speaking about literal prisoners. He addressed the people of Judah after they had been released from exile in Babylon and had returned to their homeland. But they had become prisoners in another sense. The destruction to which they had returned was disheartening and demoralizing; it required great energy just to cobble together the things needed for a subsistence-level existence. As a result, many people became prisoners of despair.

Through Zechariah, God called the people to fresh hope based on God's covenant with them. Rather than being prisoners of despair, they could choose, instead, to be "*prisoners of hope*." That phrase is a literal translation of the Hebrew, but its meaning, as made clear by the context, is "prisoners who now have hope." Think of a person who is still incarcerated but who has a parole hearing scheduled and reason to expect that the ruling will be favorable. God's people lived in difficult and discouraging times; but the promise of God's messiah gave them hope.

Working for peace. Living as we do in a world where ongoing peace remains elusive, we are in a sense like those who are still incarcerated. But if that's so, then aren't we better to have the hope of parole than the despair of a life sentence?

Biblical commentator Peter C. Craigie gets at this when he writes that Zechariah 9:9-10 is "but a small window in the black wall of war which dominates this chapter [9] as a whole. But the window opens onto a different world which, for all its alien character in our own or any other century, is at once understandable to us. ... [Peace] is something most sensible human beings desire, yet this window-view of a world at peace is somehow other-worldly and unreal."

Craigie goes on to note that Christian interpretation of this Zechariah passage identifies Jesus with this king who comes proclaiming peace, and that we have come to understand that the peace Jesus brings is in the realm of the spiritual. But, he adds, "Gradually, as men and women find peace with God, they may, bit by bit, establish the kingdom of peace

on earth." In working to do so, Craigie says, we must not lose touch with reality. "War remains a perpetual companion of civilization," he says, but concludes, "we must share the hope of the biblical prophet that one day a better world will dawn."

Being prisoners of hope rather than prisoners of despair means that we can and should work for peace, even when what we do doesn't seem to make much difference. It means that we have every reason to support initiatives to end regional and global conflicts. As far as it makes sense in the present world, we can encourage diplomacy, the signing of treaties, and the beating of swords into plowshares. On a personal level, we can practice peacefulness in our daily lives and in our relationships. We can, in our own small corner of God's kingdom, be agents of peace.

Will all those efforts be successful? No, but maybe some will. As prisoners of hope we have the incentive we need to not give up. Since we follow the Messiah who proclaims peace, we will work, believing there is no place so dark and no situation so broken that that redemption cannot happen. God sent Jesus to redeem humanity, to set aside our sins, so that we could begin the healing of the world. Scripture says that one day Jesus will come again to complete that process, to make everything right, to establish peace among the nations. Until he comes, it is better to be prisoners of hope than prisoners of despair. Today, as we bless the animals who are dear to us, we affirm our belief that peace can come: peace between neighbors, between nations, between creatures, and for all of creation.

Prayer: Peacemaking God, you have given Jesus as our teacher and guide and the Holy Spirit as our helper. I ask that you fill me with the Holy Spirit every day so that His fruit would manifest in my life, in my relationships, and in every context in which I find myself. I especially ask that I become a person whom you can rely on to extend, promote, and encourage peace in every encounter I have today and every day. I take the seeds of peace You have given me through your Holy Spirit, and I will with great intention sow them everywhere I go. "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Amen

Sources:

- Craigie, Peter C. *Twelve Prophets*, Vol. 2. The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 201-202.
- Fieldstone, Henry. "Can you name the famous treaties and accords below?" *Sporcle*, sporcle.com/games/g/peacetreaties.
- "List of treaties." *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_treaties.