

Prisoners of Hope
Zechariah 9:9-12
July 9, 2023
First Presbyterian, Luling

You may be double checking your calendar, because this is not the time of year we usually think of this Scripture. You're right. On Palm Sunday, at least if we're reading from Matthew or from John, we read not this passage itself but a quote from it. They intentionally invoke this imagery of the hoped-for king, entering Jerusalem on a donkey and not a war horse, a humble king and not a triumphant warrior. For Matthew and John, and probably it's in the background for Mark and Luke, though they quote different passages. When the Gospel writers take a look back at their Scriptures and interpret them in light of the incarnation and the looming crucifixion, it becomes clear to them that Jesus is the king on the donkey, entering Jerusalem both triumphantly and humbly.

But for the prophet Zechariah, and for the folks listening to him, they had no inkling that Jesus was coming. It's not totally clear, but it seems like Zechariah was pulled together sometime in the 500s BC. The dates and historical references are obvious and verifiable up until Zechariah chapter 8. Chapters 9 and following are sometime different, and not as obvious. In any case, the original listeners to this word from the Lord through the prophet Zechariah, weren't expecting Jesus. This is well into Israel's history, well past their glory days. They had split into two kingdoms, then each of those kingdoms had been overthrown. The people were sent into exile, outside the promised land. They had received permission to return, but it was a couple generations later, and they were much diminished. Diminished in numbers, in power, in enthusiasm, and in hope. They started to rebuild the country, rebuild the Temple, but for some unknown reason, they got stalled and quit partway. Sounds human to me. Zechariah and his contemporaries were trying to encourage them to finish up rebuilding the Temple, so that their nation could be centered once again in right worship of God, and with God's blessing, they would be able to grow stronger again.¹

Their hope for a Messiah had remained, had survived the great and communal trauma of Exile. Their understandings of who and what that Messiah would be were starting to change, though. They had not been rescued by a

¹ Whole paragraph takes information from W. Sibley Towner's introduction to Zechariah in the Harper-Collins Study Bible, NRSV, Rev. ed., 2006. Pgs 1269-70.

warrior who accomplished a violent overthrow of the empires that were conquering and oppressing them. Maybe the Messiah was going to be different. Maybe the Messiah was going to ride a donkey and bring peace. Or maybe not. They didn't quite want to give up that holy warrior idea. Right after we stopped reading, it comes back. The great day of the Lord will bring humiliation to their enemies and the Israelites will be the conquerors instead of the conquered. They are still hoping for that. But there's also this glimmer of a different kind of Messiah, who will command peace to the nations.

What grabbed my attention in this passage, is this phrase, where God, through Zechariah calls them "prisoners of hope." What a phrase. Prisoners of hope. Being prisoners obviously feels like a negative thing. If you're a literal prisoner, if you're a prisoner of an addiction, or a prisoner of debt, or a prisoner of disease. But they're called prisoners of hope. That seems...good. I like the idea of hope holding me so that I can't get away.

The ancient Israelites, particularly at this point in their history, had definitely held on to the idea of hope. But it seems more like they were imprisoning their idea of hope, their idea of who and what the Messiah should be. What the Messiah should do. They had an idea that they had so connected to their hope, that they couldn't see what God was actually up to. They were imprisoning their hope, more than being prisoners of hope. They were trying to control the situation rather than allowing themselves to be held by hope. This also sounds pretty human to me.

My grandmother grew up in the country, one of nine siblings. For a long time, she was the youngest, until her baby sister came along when she was almost six. Those years had given her plenty of time to establish her place in the family as the spoiled one. According to her siblings once they were all older, she was a little toot. As a grownup, she didn't disagree with them. As I said, they lived in the country and raised all kinds of animals, and were surrounded by all kinds of animals. My grandmother loooovved the baby chicks from the hen house and the baby rabbits she would find around the house and in the pastures. She would snuggle them and hug them and loooooovvvvvee them so much that, well, they got squeezed too hard and died. In her love, she was a little too exuberant and held on a little too tightly to those sweet fuzzy little chicks and the snuggly little bunnies. It's understandable.

My grandmother held on to those baby animals, she held them so tightly, you could stretch and say she imprisoned them, so that they could not live, they could not be what she wanted and fully intended them to be. She couldn't see

another way to show them how much she loved them. She's excused, of course, because she was a little kid.

The Israelites held on to their idea of hope, their idea of a Messiah so tightly, they imprisoned their hope so securely, that they couldn't see another way. There were glimmers, sure, and a few verses of today's passage show a different idea of a Messiah. But that wasn't the hope they had clung to. And they couldn't let it go in order to be embraced by another hope, to be imprisoned by another hope.

All that leads me to ask us what we don't want to be asked. Are we prisoners of hope, or are we imprisoning our hope? What are we holding on to so tightly, squeezing so hard, that we can't see another way to love or be loved? What is it we might let go of, or hold more loosely but just as tenderly, so that we can be prisoners of hope instead, so that hope can keep us and not let us go, instead of the other way around.

These are questions that lots of churches are asking, churches of all different shapes and sizes and kinds. Questions that lots of individual people are asking, too. The pandemic stirred us up, shuffled us around, made us uneasy, much like the exile did to the Israelites. What ideas are we holding on to that are our ideas of the hope, instead of being open to the hope itself? If you're hoping for answers, I don't have any yet. But it's worth pondering. Are we imprisoning our hope by squeezing it too tightly? How can we be prisoners of hope instead?