

Zechariah the Prophet

Zechariah 1:7-17, 3:1-10, 4:1-14, 9:9-12

Zechariah is known as the prophet of Hope. He was a prophet when the people were without hope. Israelites had returned from exile, and were beginning to resettle Israel, rebuild their homes and the home of God. Yet they were frustrated because of delays and difficulties. They were becoming apathetic, wondering why they should even try. Their expectations of what their return would look like didn't match the reality.

But to those discouraged and apathetic people came Zechariah with encouragement and hope. He encouraged them to rebuild the temple, because he knew it would be a rallying point for them in the future, a tangible, physical sign of God's presence among them, giving them assurance of better days to come and faith in the future. The people were called to repentance, but given the promise of forgiveness, that God would wipe out their transgressions. They should prepare for the Messiah God would send them.

Zechariah could envision the work completed and knew the difference it would make. He would not let Israel stay mired in the doldrums. His words encouraged the community to finish the work, to begin again. He exhorted people to put away their sins, to rebuild their lives and their temple.

The book of Zechariah begins with eight visions that are intended to encourage God's people to complete the construction of the second temple. In the center of the Zechariah's first vision is a man riding on a red horse who is the Lord's Messenger. He is Zechariah's constant companion throughout his eight visions. His task throughout the visions is to explain and interpret God's actions and plans. The Lord's Messenger also intercedes for

Israel. The Lord's Messenger is God's presence with Zechariah

That's clearest in the vision from Zechariah 3. "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the LORD's Messenger, and the accuser standing at his right hand to accuse him." The LORD's Messenger stands in our court! In Zechariah 3 God calls him "my Servant." This is the same Servant Isaiah describes as stricken by God and afflicted; who bears our griefs and carries our sorrows; who was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities.

Later in that same chapter, God also calls the Messenger "the Shoot." This builds on the earlier promise in Jeremiah 23:5, "Days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Shoot, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land."

What's more, the LORD's Messenger is also called "the Stone" which comes from Psalm 118, "The Stone the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone. The LORD did this and it is marvelous in our eyes." In the presence of the LORD's Messenger—who is the Servant and the Shoot and the Stone—what does the accuser say? What can the accuser say? Nothing!

The Messenger lives to rebuke the accuser! The Servant is vindicated and alive! The Shoot is flourishing and stunningly beautiful. And the Stone the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone. The LORD did this and it is still marvelous in our eyes!

The stone becomes the foundation described in the reading we heard from Zechariah 4. The Temple would be rebuilt, and God would be

among his people again. But it wouldn't happen by might or power or human effort. It would only happen by God's Spirit that has the power to make a mountain into a plain, and to lift up valleys.

For a people who felt forgotten by God, Zechariah's words were just what his community needed to hear. He did his job well for the Bible tells us that after a work stoppage of 16 years the work to rebuild the temple began again and was completed. And a rebuilt temple makes—as they say—all the difference in the world. It is a permanent sign of God's presence with his people.

But after the visions to encourage the people to rebuild the temple and to remind them of God's presence with them, Zechariah looks further ahead. After the temple's completion, historical realities of life still fell short.

Zechariah 9–14 addresses these unresolved promises, indicating how God's kingdom will advance so that he reigns for eternity, how he will be with his people forever.

Suffering, however, will precede the final celebration. The cross will come before the crown. Chapters 9–14 temper the positive features in chapters 1–8. Zechariah prevents us from embracing an illusory optimism or a theology of glory.

The book's first eight chapters mostly exhibit the "now" of God's kingdom, the present Zechariah was in. On the other hand, chapters 9–14 announce the "not yet" of the divine plan which will be consummated through the Messiah's rejection, death, resurrection and Second Advent. Everyone suffers in the last six chapters; God's people, their enemies, the coming Messiah and, most surprising of all, God himself gets pierced in the battle.

Zechariah's oracles present these Messianic visions from different angles. The Messiah is a

lowly King endowed with salvation; he is a rejected and pierced shepherd; he is a powerful king who will sit on David's throne. His ministry is marked with suffering but ends in glory.

Zechariah envisioned a leader, a Messiah, who would live without the excesses and failures of previous kings. The messiah would be one who would live righteously and lead justly. What better way to express his vision than to write of a king "triumphant and victorious, yet humble and riding on a donkey?" People would understand that unlike other leaders who rode horses, symbols of victory in war, Israel's leader would instead ride a donkey. He would lead by persuasion, not by coercion, physical or military force of any kind. This leader would rule not just Israel, but all nations.

With the use of the image of the leader riding on a donkey, Zechariah was able to pull together opposites representing the best and worst of times, hope and despair, with the expectation that with God, all would be right with the world. The king would destroy the weapons of war, and bring peace to the nations. The king comes. Rejoice, God keeps His promises! They were God's people. The Messiah was coming to them! Nothing could stop God from fulfilling his promises made throughout the century. The people should turn from frustration to exaltations, from heaviness to happiness. The Messiah was coming to them.

The Gospel writers all see Jesus' actions on Palm Sunday as fulfilling this prophecy. Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, a symbol of humility. He came in peace, though he could have turned the cheering crowd into an army or called down an angelic army himself. He came to be king, but not the king the people expected. He came to save them, but not in the way they were expecting. Instead of dragging defeated

captives behind him, the poor and lowly made up the crowd cheering him on.

Today is the day we celebrate Trinity Sunday, when we remember the Triune nature of God. And at first, that can seem to be confusing. A God that we cannot understand, a God who is Three in One and One in Three, who is Three Persons yet One God, seems unapproachable and incomprehensible.

Yet the Trinity reminds us that God comes near to us. God the Father is active in providing all that we need, sustaining creation. In Jesus, God became flesh, moved into the neighborhood, and faced all of the trials and temptations we do, yet remained without sin. Instead of being in the temple, God came in Jesus in the flesh. Through the blood of Jesus, we have been made holy. Because Jesus is advocating for us with the Father, we can approach the throne of grace with confidence. We have been declared righteous before God. And the Holy Spirit, whose work we celebrated last Sunday, works in us to create faith, and enlighten us.

Expectations meet reality. The reality is that Jesus suffers and dies. The reality is that we are called to take up our cross. The reality is that sometimes prayers go unanswered, hopes are dashed and deliverance from debt and depression doesn't come.

There is so much we don't have—yet. But there is so much more that we do have—now!

“Behold, your King comes to you, righteous and saved, riding on a donkey and delivering shalom!” God is with us, and always will be. That's a promise we can trust.

David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
Ames, IA
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