SERMON
“Prisoners of Hope”
Zechariah 9:9-12
Sunday, July 6, 2014

Two scientists were on a field trip in the mountains. They discovered a baby eagle in a nest on a jutting rock, just below the top of a dangerous cliff. The eaglet had been deserted, and they wanted to rescue it. They asked the young son of their guide if they could lower him on a rope to fetch the little bird.

The boy was not at all enthusiastic about their plan, so he declined. They offered him money, and then doubled it, but still the boy refused. Finally, one of the scientists asked in despair: “Well, then, how do you propose that we save the baby eagle?”

The mountain boy replied: “I'd be glad to go down to rescue the bird for free if you'll let my dad hold the rope.”

In our Bible Study for this morning Zechariah is prophesying to the freed Babylonian captives upon their return home to Judah. Returning home was anti-climatic for most of these captives. Even though they were freed from Babylonian captivity they were now subjects of a new political regime: the Persian Empire. In spite of Persia’s might there was no guarantee of security. At any moment the Jews could be taken back into captivity. Most of the post-exilic Jews were not well-off, and many still had dreams of someday living in a kingdom of their own under a messianic leader. But, for the present, that seemed impossible. Even though they were finally home they were living in despair.

Zechariah’s words then, are like a rope that our Heavenly Father is holding out; offering hope, not only for the post-exilic Jew, but for any and all of us who find ourselves living in hopeless situations. The challenge before us is, however, will we trust God enough to take hold of that rope!

Both the Gospel writers Matthew and John referenced this passage from Zechariah in writing of Jesus. For us, Jesus truly can be described as “righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” But for the post-exilic Jew, who had not yet even developed the concept of a promised Messiah; Zechariah was offering a hope in the midst of their prison of despair.

So how does this text, outside that Jesus is the Promised Messiah, speak to us today? Since in its own time it was prophecy and not news, it functioned to reinforce a "someday" hope in those who were persuaded by it: "Yes, 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."
Even though the whole idea that the world will be at peace sounds wonderful, we like our post-exilic ancestors still wonder if it will ever be achievable. Even knowing that Jesus is the Promised One still does not calm our hearts and bring us comfort when we turn on the news and hear of the world’s unrest and latest war. How then can this Old Testament passage about a messiah announcing peace among the nations speak to us?

It tells us that we have a choice between being a prisoner of despair or a prisoner of hope. Even though they were no longer prisoners of Babylon Zechariah knew that their return to their homeland would leave them still vulnerable and feeling like prisoners. He knew their despair would get the best of them. The destruction to which they had returned was overwhelming, and it required great energy just to cobble together the things needed for a subsistence-level existence. As a result, many had become prisoners of despair. Through Zechariah, however, God was calling them to a fresh hope.

American theologian Peter J. Gomes once said of hope: “Hope does not deny the circumstances of the present, and hope doesn’t help us get out of our difficulties. Hope doesn't get us out, but it does get us through.”

In a museum in England there is a painting called ‘Hope.’ In the background are the familiar outlines of the continents and oceans of planet Earth. But in the foreground is a beautiful woman seated at a harp - a harp with strings dangling helplessly from the top or lying uselessly on the lap of her dress, a harp with only one string still tautly strung.

The story is told of two women who once stood in front of the picture commenting on how little of the harp was still intact. One said to the other: “Hope - why do they call it hope?”

Overhearing their conversation the museum’s curator interrupted: “The reason is that from Moses to Mary Magdalene, the harp of hope has always been a broken instrument. Hope is always almost lost or it would not be hope. Hope is plucking that one string.”

Rather than being prisoners of despair, through Christ, God has transformed us into prisoners of hope.