

11-13-22

Zechariah: the Messianic Prophet

Then the Word of the Lord of hosts came to me.... Zechariah 7.4

Last year Providence was clearly working when I somehow missed the given lectionary text and chose the prophet Haggai for the sermon last week. This week I purposely set aside the lectionary for a text from the prophet Zechariah. I did this because Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries, and both prophets were focused on calling the Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Both speak to our situation today!

Haggai, an older man about whom we know little, started to prophesy in August of 520 BC, and Zechariah, a much younger man began about two months later, in October/November. Whereas Haggai's mission lasted only 3 months and he disappeared from the scene, Zechariah continued to prophesy for two more years, well after the rebuilding of the temple had begun. Then he too disappeared from the public scene until 30-40 years after the temple was finished at which time he reappeared. This time his focus was very different from when he had first begun his prophetic ministry.

The first part of Zechariah's ministry was a call for the people to rebuild the temple, a building which **represented God's Presence with them**. The second part of his ministry was a call to prophesy the coming of the Messiah, Who, in fact, **is the Presence of God with His people**. So, even though they were seemingly very different topics, in essencet, they were very much alike.

The book baring Zechariah's name introduces him as *the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo*. We know Iddo was the head of a priestly family who was among the first wave of refugees to return to Judah in 538 BC. For Zechariah to have begun his prophetic ministry 18 years later he must have been with his father and grandfather among the 50,000 Jews who made the 4 month trek from Babylon. Being the grandson of a priest, he probably was also a priest himself, which would explain his strong interest in the rebuilding of the temple.

So when Haggai appears on the scene commanding the people to rebuild the temple, Zechariah was quick to join him. If there is one word that can summarize the book bearing his name it has to be **hope!** Whereas Haggai rebuked the people telling them their dire circumstances were the result of their faithlessness, Zechariah was softer seeking to encourage them with the hope that God would remember His Promises to them. As a prophet of hope, we remember Zechariah today mostly because his message to the people morphed **from** encouraging them to rebuild the temple **to** prophesying about the coming Messiah, God's Christ. Zechariah proved to be a popular prophet among the New Testament writers.

Along with Haggai, Zechariah is also among the 12 minor prophets, with 14 chapters to his name compared to Haggai's 2. Both prophets made considerable use of the Name

The Lord of Hosts: Haggai 14 times in his short book, and Zechariah 45 times in his. Remember from last week, *the Lord of Hosts* is an Old Testament reference to God as Commander of armies and angels, as well as stars and planets, the One Who creates, protects and sustains.

In addition to the reference to God as *the Lord of hosts*, the phrase *the Word of the Lord* appears 13 times in Zechariah. Having reflected on their experience during the exile, and remembering the failure of their ancestors to obey the Word of the Lord, their hearts were now much more attune to listening to and obeying God's Word. It was during Israel's restoration period that the Word of God became central to Jewish life, what we know today as one of the streams of living water, **the Evangelical Tradition**, or Word-centered life. Our Christian roots are very Jewish!

It's interesting to note that Zechariah alludes to or hints at all seven streams of living water in our short passage this morning. A contingent of men appeared to inquire of him if the people who had been mourning and fasting on the anniversary of the destruction of first temple should stop this spiritual discipline once the temple was rebuilt. The Word of the Lord came to Zechariah and he responded to their question with this question:

When you fasted and lamented in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for Me that you fasted?

Fasting is a form of prayer, and their question, and Zechariah's question in response, brings to mind **the Contemplative Tradition**, or the prayer-filled life. The answer to both questions lies in the motives of their hearts, and that is really what contemplative prayer is about, waking up to God's Presence while at the same time waking up to the state of our own hearts. Then the encounter with these men concludes with another Word from the Lord:

Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Having told them to take time to examine their own hearts, now he appeals to them to *render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to another*. This demonstrates **the Holiness Tradition**, that is the virtuous life that responds to life with integrity. The virtuous life is a respons-able life, a life that knows what to do, how to do it, and when to do it.

Then, in the same sentence the prophet alluded to **the Social Justice Tradition**, that is the compassionate life, telling them *not to oppress the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, or the poor*. Take note: all of these traditions, or streams of living water, poured from Christ into the world. Of course, Jesus, the One Whom Zechariah prophesied, is the full expression of **the Sacramental Tradition**, or the incarnational life through which we encounter the invisible God in the visible world in Christ.

In his short book, Zechariah summarizes life in the Kingdom of God. He could have only done this by the Holy Spirit Who gave rise to **the Charismatic Tradition**, that is the Spirit-empowered life, for as he encouraged the people he wrote:

This is the word of the Lord...Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

These great traditions of the Church find their source in the One in Whom Zechariah prophesied, Jesus Christ, in Whom *we live and move and have our being* by the Holy Spirit.

As the prophet called the ancient Jews to rebuild the temple as **a reminder of God's Presence** with His people, he also called them to have hope for the future, a hope rooted and grounded in the coming Messiah Who would fulfill all God's Promises and **literally be God's Presence** with His people.

As a congregation we have taken some difficult hits these last few years: the pandemic, the falling stock market, inflation. In this difficult place we are being challenged to renovate this building, reform our life together, revitalize our worship experience, and call a new pastor. In the midst of all of this, the prophet Zechariah has a word of hope for us today. For Israel's story is our story!

During the restoration period, which lasted almost 100 years, God continued to call people to positions of leadership from among the Jews. God was concerned for every aspect of their lives: the place where they worshipped, their failing crops, inflation, their relationship with God, and their relationships with one another. Christian spirituality embraces the whole of life, which is why the 7 streams of living water are so important to our walk with Christ.

It is important that, as the people of God, we be Word-centered. It is important, as the people of God, we be Spirit-empowered. It is important as the people of God, we be concerned for social justice. It is important as the people of God, we be prayer-filled. It is important as the people of God, we live virtuous lives, for our effectiveness is rooted in our characters. It is important as the people of God, that others can see in our visible lives the life of the invisible God, the incarnational life, that is Jesus Christ Himself.

Zechariah alludes to all the streams of living water in the Church except the *Abba*, Father tradition. Even so, it is inherent in his prophecy because he prophesied to the ancient Jews of the coming of Christ, Who was Himself the fullest expression of the *Abba*, Father tradition, that is the surrendered life. The surrendered life is the keystone that holds all the traditions together.

The surrendered life integrates the other six traditions of the church. Without the surrendered life, the church fragments; people take up their agenda's, and are at odds with one another. We experienced this in the Presbyterian Church when the evangelical and the social justice traditions were competing for the churches soul. For decades I

witnessed the evangelical tradition dominate the life of the Presbyterian Church finally being displaced by the social justice tradition. Jesus prayed that we should be one with him and with one another, that happens when all the traditions of the Church are integrated through the *Abba*, Father tradition, that is the surrendered life. There is no tension and there are no hostilities in the surrendered life, for the surrendered life lives the life of Jesus, a life of perfect love.

Now, as we step into our future and accept the challenge to renovate this building, to continue to reform our life in Christ, and to call a new pastor, it is imperative that we take a wholistic approach and allow each part of the Body of Christ to express itself; whether your focus is on the Spirit, social justice, holiness, the Word, the sacraments, or prayer, we are bound to one another by Christ Who perfectly lived the surrendered life.

As the ancient Jews were encouraged when Haggai prophesied the Word of the Lord to them, saying, *I AM with you*, so too, today we are encouraged by Zechariah, the prophet of hope, whose prophesies centered on the coming of God's Christ, the One Whose very last words to His disciples were, *I AM with you, always!*

So as we step into future with all of its challenges, our hope is in Christ, the One Whose last Word to us is,

I AM with you, always, even until the end of the age!