

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 9 – Year A – 7.5.20 - The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony  
Zechariah 9:9-12, Psalm 145:8-15, Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

This is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend. Last night I fell asleep to the sound of firecrackers in the distance. There were many celebrations large and small around the country. People were celebrating the founding of our nation. The holiday reminds us of the revolution against rule by a King.

Most of us have very little if any experience with Kingdoms. The one we think we know best is probably the United Kingdom in the British Isles. The monarchy there is very different from the way old style kingdoms worked. Elizabeth is the monarch but she shares power with others who also have power.

Kingdoms and their rulers throughout history have been much more of the authoritarian and absolute model. The rulers held the power of life and death over their subjects and the law was what they said the it was. Think of King Herod, who could simply order the decapitation of John the Baptist because his step-daughter requested it.

When, long before Jesus, the Jewish people spoke of a Messiah, what they meant was a king in the line of David, one who had power and could restore their fortunes. A King who could force the release of the captives from Babylon and rebuild Jerusalem and restore the worship of God in the Temple.

The messianic kingdom that God had in mind was very different. Have you ever noticed that it seems like God continually turns our expectations upside down? We expect an avenging savior and we get a gentle and humble Son of God who goes to the cross for our sins.

The prophet Zechariah, who's words we read today, had an inkling, an idea that the messiah that was expected was not the messiah that was coming. If you were Jewish and living in Jerusalem at the time that Jesus was in the city, you would have remembered that while you and your ancestors had been resident for centuries, you had never been free. Judah had been a vassal state for a long, long time. And now you were subject to the rule of the Romans. If you were Jewish and living in Jerusalem, in the shadow of Solomon's Temple, you would have been steeped in the Hebrew scripture, what we have long called the Old Testament. In the days of the harsh Roman occupation you would have heard the words of Zechariah as a promise from God. Prophecy is not for one time only but is to inspire and warn us in every age. Prophecy, when it is of God, is timeless.

If you were a part of the crowd surrounding Jesus, you would have listened to him. You would have measured this new prophet and his words against the promise held out by earlier prophets like the prophet Zechariah. Was this the coming messiah, the expected one? It was the question John the Baptist asked from prison and it was the question on the minds and hearts of the disciples and others who followed this new teacher.

The disciples would have wondered about the prophesy of a king in the line of David, coming to them humbly not to engage in war but to bring peace and restoration, first to Israel, then to the nations and finally to all of creation. Was this the promised messiah? Could this be the fulfilment of the promise that God had made so long ago? It wasn't what they had expected, wasn't what they had hoped for. Was this man Jesus the Messiah that would rule with righteousness and justice, who would free the oppressed people of Israel and beyond Israel to the ends of the earth?

The disciples would have known the words of Zechariah, they could have recited them from memory. "...I shall set your prisoners free from the waterless pit." Wonderful, hopeful words in a time when the troubled times seemingly would never end.

The waterless pit. The most desolate place in the dry and lifeless wilderness. A wilderness of physical place but also a wilderness of mind, heart and soul. Was this Jesus the one who had come to set them from whatever held them prisoner?

Remember Joseph of the many-colored coat? Joseph who was the proud and boastful youngest son, spoiled and resented by his older brothers. Joseph who one day found himself, thrown into a waterless pit in the desert, left to die by those same older brothers. What must have been Joseph's thoughts as he took stock of his situation. He could not save himself. But God used these circumstances for good. Along came a caravan of Ishmaelites, on their way to Egypt. Joseph's brothers realized that by selling Joseph into slavery to be resold in Egypt they could profit and at the same time get rid of a pest. And that is what they did. Joseph was freed from the waterless pit and sold into slavery in Egypt. This might not have been the freedom Joseph hoped for, but God takes the long view and working through human beings takes time. Joseph eventually rose to be powerful in Egypt and was able to save his father, his brothers and all their families from famine. Rescuing him from the waterless pit, God made Joseph free. Had Joseph insisted only on the rescue he had hoped for, life and the opportunity to be revenged on his brothers, the story would have had a different ending. Joseph would not been free, remaining a prisoner of his limited hope. Instead, God gave Joseph a freedom not of power, though he had immense power, God gave him a freedom of love and forgiveness toward those who had meant him harm. And Joseph recognized the larger hope of God and lived it.

Jesus had called twelve disciples to follow him into a special ministry of proclamation. The kingdom of God, the messianic kingdom had come into their midst in the person of Jesus. God was doing a new thing. The messianic kingdom would not be one of power but of love, not one of dominance but of community and sharing.

He had taught them the rudiments of this new way of living, a residence in a kingdom greater than that of Rome, the kingdom of God. Jesus sent them out to announce this new kingdom, one of love and freedom, one of restoration and hope. Hope beyond their imagination, hope not only of a strong nation but of a renewed life.

In speaking to the disciples and to the crowds that surrounded him wherever he went, Jesus had words of invitation and comfort. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Hope. Hope for freedom and for a new way of living in harmony with one another and with the creation. Hope.

Whether the disciples and the crowd knew it in the moment, the prophesy of Zechariah had been fulfilled. Prophecy is not for one time only but for our inspiration and warning in every age. Prophecy when it is of God is timeless. The prophesy of Zechariah and the words of Jesus were not just for their time but for ours as well.

Sometimes the last few months have felt like a waterless pit, with no rescue in sight. What we hoped would be a short time apart seems to be stretching into the unknown future. We are weary and feel like this is a heavy burden. Remember Joseph of the many colored coat?

We will leave the waterless pit and move into the creation that God seeks to restore and we will do it as a nation and as a community. We are a part of that restoration of the world we live in and the creation that surrounds us each one of us. If we think small we can hope for a return to the way things were, but if we think great, we can hope for a new creation out of what had been. We can take what is good forward and leave behind that which was destructive or harmful. But the new creation has to be new for all of us, for every one of us. Old and young, people of color and those not, women and men, those secure and those homeless. The list goes on. This is the yoke that Jesus calls us to assume, each one of us a part of the whole. The promise of God is that if we do this together, in love and forgiveness the yoke will be easy and the burden to each light.