

Pentecost 5 – Proper 9 – Year A – 2020

I think sometimes we too easily dismiss the readings we have from the Hebrew Scriptures, or what we have labeled the “Old Testament.” Some of the stories are downright gory. The history is hard to follow. While there are some verses or stories that stick with us, we need context to better understand a lot of what we read.

And so it is this morning. If our reading from the prophet Zechariah sounds familiar, it should. Its words remind us of Palm Sunday – as they “prefigure” the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. But the context in Zechariah is this: Many of the people exiled to Babylon have now returned to their own land, but it is under the rule of others. The Persian empire is in control – and will hold that control for 200 years, before being followed by the Greeks and then the Romans. So while the exile is over, the Jewish people are still under the thumb of others. One commentator explains it well when he says:

“The words of comfort in Zechariah 9:9-12 thus emerge from long decades of yearning for restoration, as the experience of imperial subjugation became unbearable. They reflect the persistence of hope, even when its fulfillment seemed less and less likely. At a time of increasing expectation for an apocalyptic, otherworldly deliverance, these verses preserved the belief that a just, equitable political order could still be restored in this world.”ⁱ

In other words, the subjugation these people had been experiencing became unbearable, and they were expecting, hoping for the triumphant militaristic deliverance of a mighty king. Note the phrase, “Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope...” They were *prisoners* of their hope in militaristic deliverance – and *that* hope blinded them, blocked them, from seeing any *other* means of deliverance, of liberation, of restoration.

Zechariah’s words say that a king *is* coming – but he will be riding on a donkey – he will associate with the downtrodden and disenfranchised – and he will “cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations...” War, military might, force, these will not be the ways of *this* king... these will not be the instruments God uses to bring about peace.

When we let our “hope” in a solution that will magically come from *outside* ourselves relieve us of the obligation to act, or change our way of thinking, or envision new possibilities, then that hope becomes a prison. It can become for us a burden that wearies us, like the Jewish people wearied of centuries of subjugation by others. They looked for a mighty savior that did not come.

The savior that *did* come, of course, riding on a donkey, bringing his good news to the poor, was one some folks did not, *could* not recognize. They were looking for a warrior king on a white horse, after all.

Sometimes we have our expectations and hopes so set on one thing that we are unwilling to see God fulfilling our hearts' real desire. No wonder Jesus sounds frustrated in today's gospel passage. "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

Yes, these expectations we have, these lines we draw of what a person sent by God will look like, what the *way* of God looks like, can be a burden to us that weighs us down. It can get very tiresome to be on guard constantly, determining who is right and wrong, who is following the rules, who is allowed to *make* the rules.

And then Jesus says: "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."

Those are words we long to hear. They are comforting words. In fact, those words were a significant part of the worship of the Episcopal Church from the 1929 Prayer Book –
"Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all who truly turn to him. Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you."

In that 1929 Prayer Book, those "comfortable words" came right after the Confession. In some ways, these comfortable words follow from us saying with Paul what we heard in the reading from the letter to the Romans, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

I think we all have that experience – of not being or doing quite what we think we could or should. Paul blames this on "sin" – which is really anything that separates us from God and from one another.

We have the image before us of a yoke. We heard about a yoke last week in relation to the reading from Jeremiah – where he showed the people they would be under the yoke – or the rule - of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. In today’s gospel – we have Jesus invoking that same image of a yoke.

What I want to say here is that we are all “yoked” to someone or something. And some of those yokes are sin-ful – because they separate us from God and one another. We are yoked to our families, sometimes to our jobs. But we have also yoked ourselves to ideas or worldviews, some of which come from the dominant culture, and some from our families, and some from religion itself. And although a yoke is intended to help an animal or person carry or haul a load, the yokes themselves can become a burden.

So in today’s gospel, when Jesus tells us to take *his* yoke upon us, we need to pay attention. Because first he acknowledges our weariness, the heaviness in our bodies and souls that we are carrying around. Those words themselves are so comforting, because they acknowledge what we are feeling. But then he invites us to take *his* yoke. And we cannot do that until we break the yokes to which we have bound ourselves – because those yokes don’t really help us carry or haul the load...

If I was given the religious yoke as a child that said God rewards good behavior and punishes us when we are bad, and if I keep myself tied to the yoke of that vision of God, that yoke will not help me carry the load of something awful happening in my life or to someone I love. That yoke separates me, essentially, from the unconditional love of God when I need it the most.

If I am yoked to the belief, to the *hope*, that if only we change things at the top, things will change at the bottom, that yoke does not help me carry the burden of seeing that people at the bottom continue to suffer. This realization came to me this week when I heard a former Mt. Pleasant mayor talking about social justice issues that are here in front of us. She talked of the PEAK program, which provides after-school and summer programs for kids. But of course there is a cost to enroll your child in the program... but there *is* a reduced rate for families who qualify. The reduced rate for a 6-week summer enrichment program is \$200. – That might not seem like a lot, unless you’re making minimum wage. And if you have more than one child? So some children don’t have access to these programs. And we know that children who participate in afterschool or summer programs typically do better in school. So those who cannot participate – don’t do as well. And then we say, “Wow, kids from *that* group, they just don’t achieve as much.” And that is what a

systematic problem looks like. To change something for these folks, we need to change something at the bottom, like funding for a program for children, or looking at who *decides* what gets funded and what does not. We need to break the yoke of the belief that change comes from the top, and yoke ourselves to the one who identifies with the poor, the outcast, the overburdened and weary ones.

When Jesus says, “Take my yoke...” he is inviting us, I believe, to both put ourselves under his domain, his vision, his mission – but he is also inviting us to do all that *with* him – to be yoked *to* him. In taking up the yoke of Jesus, in yoking ourselves to him, we *will* find rest – because we will find there that we are no longer bound to worldviews that say we are not enough or that things will never change.

Yokes commonly hold two animals together. Think of a pair of oxen, for example. And it is fairly common to yoke a young ox to an older, more experienced ox – because the one who knows how to pull the plow will “show” the younger one what to do as they go along. The younger one will “learn” from the older one that he is “yoked” to. And so, Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me...”

New Testament scholar Dale Allison says, “When Jesus says, ‘learn from me,’ he is calling us not just to read further in the Gospel or to mull over theological ideas but to incarnate for ourselves the virtues demanded by his speech and exhibited in his actions. One learns of Jesus by doing, by adopting his spirit and living his imperatives.”ⁱⁱ

We all need comforting words right now – and we got them in our scriptures for today, but on this weekend marking this nation’s breaking of the yoke of its oppression, we are also given questions. To what have we yoked ourselves since – as individuals, as a church, as a nation? – and what will it mean for us to take up the yoke of Jesus and learn from him? I don’t have the answers. I only know we have to keep asking the questions.
Amen.

[Zechariah 9:9-12](#) [Psalm 145:8-15](#) [Romans 7:15-25a](#) [Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30](#)

ⁱ Couey, J. Blake. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4505

ⁱⁱ Allison, Dale. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=105