

"Prisoners of Hope"

Text: Zechariah 9:9-12

"Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen." (Jude 1:24-25)

Dear Fellow Christians:

I've never been held as a captive – at least not in the normal, non-spiritual, non-metaphorical sense of the words "captive" and "prisoner." I suspect no one else here has either. Other have, others like Mayer Hersh, a Jew I recently read about who survived multiple Nazi concentration camps, including a year and a half in Auschwitz. What he and others like him endured was horrible beyond belief. Before his death in 2013, Hersh shared the view held by so many other survivors. There was one simple thing that "kept him going": hope. Human beings can bear up under unimaginable hardship and misery so long as they have hope. Take away that hope, and the will to survive evaporates.

Hersh's ancestors, the Old Testament Jews, serve as examples. Israel was divided in two after the death of Solomon. Both halves of the kingdom eventually earned God's wrath because of their idolatry and immorality. Both were carried off by invading armies into bondage. One half, the Northern Ten Tribes, was carried off by the Assyrians, and to them God offered no promise, and therefore no hope. Their captivity was terminal. They simply ceased to exist as a people or nation. That's what happens in the absence of the sort of hope that only God himself can provide. The other two tribes – Judah and the remnants of Benjamin – were also carried off, this time by the Babylonians. Yet here there was one great difference: this group left with hope - hope based on God's promise that they would not remain in exile forever, but that a remnant would be preserved and returned. This group was given an intriguing title in our text for this morning: "Prisoners of Hope."

To learn more about what it means to be a prisoner of hope and how that term relates also to you, hear now that text, found in the Book of the Prophet Zechariah, the Ninth Chapter:

^{ESV} **Zechariah 9:9-12** *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. ¹⁰ I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall*

be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. ¹¹ As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. ¹² Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

This is God's Word. In fact we entrust our very souls to this conviction – that God himself has given us these words, and that they are therefore perfect, holy, and true in every way. With complete confidence in the power of these words to convert, preserve and strengthen each of us, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth."** Amen.

Both the Prophet Haggai and the Prophet Zechariah lived during and after the Babylonian Captivity. Their Books were written to the 50,000 Jews that were allowed to return to Jerusalem and who had started and then stopped the rebuilding of the temple there. The rebuilding had ground to a halt for two reasons. First, the neighboring peoples feared a rejuvenated Jewish nation and therefore began to resist the effort to rebuild what had always been the heart of the Jewish kingdom – the temple in Jerusalem. The other reason for the work stoppage was the greed, self-centeredness, and lack of faith of the Jewish people. The people had bought into the lie that is still wildly popular today: *"Self has to come first."*

While the people may have bought into this nonsense, they certainly didn't get it from God. The Prophet Haggai, a contemporary of Zechariah, put it to the people this way: **"Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. ⁸ Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD. ⁹ You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. ¹⁰ Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce."** (Haggai 1:7-10)

In releasing the Jews from their Babylonian captivity, God had done so with the instruction that they were supposed to return to Jerusalem and the first thing they were supposed to do there was to rebuild the temple. In fact that's the whole reason King Cyrus let the Jews return to Jerusalem at all. From Ezra 1:2-4: **"Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem,**

which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel--he is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem."

Get the problem? God released the "prisoners of hope" from their captivity and told them to go home and rebuild his temple. Reminiscent of when they left Egypt centuries earlier, God even saw to it that they left their Babylonian captivity with full pockets and leading free herds. In other words, *he himself* had provided everything they needed *to rebuild the temple*. The problem was they didn't use it for that. Oh they started. Two years after they left they finished the foundation, but then work ground to a halt and the temple wouldn't be completed for almost 20 years.

What happened? They began to feel a little light in the wallet and bought into the notion that they needed to establish themselves first, to build their own homes and farms and vineyards and orchards, and *then* they would see to the temple. It apparently didn't really matter that God's own stated purpose for their release and endowment was to go rebuild the temple. How utterly "reasonable" to conclude: *"We've got nothing. We'll do it God's way once we have something."* How rational, and yet how absolutely wrong.

There was more going on here than first meets the eye. The Jews were returned to the Promised Land as a civilian nation. The peoples and nations all around them had both armies and insatiable aggression. Again, how logical and reasonable to believe that they had no hope without an army to protect them. And how could they raise an army if they had no income? And how could they have an income if they didn't first establish themselves in the land? In this they not only underestimated their God, they also forgot their own history.

Israel's success was always based on faith, not might. Their highpoint came under King David and his Son Solomon. Largely forgotten was the fact that at the time David came to rule Israel, the nation had no army (it had been wiped out in a catastrophic loss to the Philistines) no king (for both King Saul and his Son Jonathan had been killed in battle) no high priest (Eli died upon hearing that his sons had also been killed in the battle with the Philistines) and in the minds of the people they had no God (the Ark of the Covenant having also been captured by the Philistines). Humanly speaking, Israel was done. Gone. Hopeless. And yet within a few short years God made them as powerful as they would ever be.

So why does God seem to always do it that way? Mostly because we are such an arrogant bunch of ingrates. We love to imagine that good things happen to us because *we* make them happen. It's only when good things

happen to us *when we are weak, helpless, and powerless* that we tend to give the credit and the glory to God, where it obviously belongs.

Remember how God had to teach Paul that lesson? Paul had some impediment that – at least in his mind – prevented him from becoming all that he could be and accomplishing all that he could accomplish. He asked God three times to remove it and God refused. Why? God's answer: ***"My grace is enough for you, for my power is made known by your weakness."*** The people that returned from the Babylonian Captivity still had to learn, understand, and believe that even after their release they were, and would always be, prisoners of hope.

Look again at our text. Note that God didn't say, *"You will rise to great military prowess and slay the enemies round about you in glorious battle."* He said, ***"I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off."*** Man wouldn't do this by his might. God would do it by his. The rulership that God was to establish was not going to be a kingdom of earthly might and aggression but a spiritual kingdom of peace. In the words of our text: ***"...and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth."***

This kingdom then was going to be different – gone the war horse, the chariot, the bow and spear. It was to be a kingdom where God, not man, provided security. Israel wasn't so thrilled with the idea. In fact they still hadn't bought into the idea when, hundreds of years later, the very One prophesied in our text finally came to them, when their promised King finally came to them ***"...righteous and having salvation, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."***

But that's exactly why they still were – and would forever have to remain – *prisoners of hope*. Hope is not based on what you already have in your hands or that which lies within your power to secure. Hope is based on a promise, and the only *certain* hope is based on *God's* promise. The people could never carry out God's plan on their own, without him. For God's plan to work, God had to remain with his people, obviously so since it was God alone who could and would carry out his own plan.

Fast forward to today and it immediately becomes obvious that that same plan is still in effect. It's called the gospel. We today are ***"the prisoners"*** who needed to ***"be released from the waterless pit"*** of work-righteousness and unbelief. As God said that he alone would do it then, so he is the only one who can do it now – with *you*, in *your* life. How? Why? Same reason he gave to the Jews returning from their captivity thousands of years ago: ***"As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from***

the waterless pit." God did it because he promised, and he promised because he loved us, the unlovable.

Yet still today man struggles to do what only God can do – in so many different ways. Still today we imagine that God only *empowers us* to do what needs to be done. That's not the way it worked back then; that's not the way it works today. It's not how Abraham and Sarah were able to have children in their old age. It's not how Zechariah and Elizabeth were able to give birth in their old age to the Great Forerunner, John the Baptist. It's not how a virgin was able to conceive and give birth to the very Son of God. Man couldn't do this, but God could. And did.

You and I then are still prisoners of hope. That means that we are captive to the righteousness that *is provided for us* by grace through faith in what Jesus Christ accomplished for us, not by our own strength, works, or goodness. We still today have no other options or alternatives – not if we would be saved. Still today if our Savior turned to us, as he did to his own disciples and asked if they too would abandon him and seek another way, another Savior – still today you and I must answer, ***"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."*** There is no path to eternal life apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

You and I are also then "prisoners" in the sense that we have nowhere else to go. No other options if we are to be saved. And yet our eternal futures could not possibly be any brighter or more secure *because of the certain hope that God himself has given us*. We are captives of Jesus Christ, but that captivity has brought us perfect freedom. The hope that is ours carries with it no doubt or uncertainty, only the confident expectation that the very same Son of God who once came to rescue us will one day return to carry us to his side in heaven for all eternity.

Seek therefore no other way. Rejoice in your "captivity" and rightly regard it as the perfect freedom it truly is – trusting your God to provide all that he said he would, in this life and the next Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Romans 7:14-25** For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹ ¶ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

^{ESV} **Matthew 11:25-30** At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

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The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – July 9, 2017

The Opening Hymn – 575 (Red Hymnal)

"Before the Lord We Bow"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Epistle Lesson: (Romans 7:14-25) One of the devil's great lies is the notion that Christians fall from grace every time they sin with knowledge; that is, when they know something is wrong and in weakness do it anyway. Note well here how the Apostle Paul himself confessed that he repeatedly did the very things he knew were wrong. Christians are not those who never sin. Christians are those that struggle against temptation. As always, Jesus is our only hope for rescue.

Psalm 146 (Supplement page 41) (Brown Hymnal)

The Gospel Lesson: (Matthew 11:25-30) Jesus himself here offers us a most tender and precious offer: **"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."** Those who labor are those burdened not only by the cares and hardships of this sinful world, but by their own sin. This invitation includes every single child of God. No matter what is troubling you, Jesus here invites you to place all your cares on him – chief of which are the sins that cause us such distress and shame.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed (Supplement page 5)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 517 (Verses 1-2) (Red Hymnal)

"The Will of God Is Always Best"

The Sermon – Text: Zechariah 9:9-12 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Prisoners of Hope"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Offering followed by the Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 517 (Verses 3-4) (Red Hymnal)

"The Will of God Is Always Best"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 577 (Red Hymnal)

"God Bless Our Native Land"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (58) Average (47)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today

-10:00 a.m.

– Worship Service w/ Communion

-11:15 a.m.

– Fellowship and coffee time

-11:30 a.m.

– Quarterly Voters' Meeting

-12:30 p.m.

– Church Council Meeting

Next Sunday

-10:00 a.m.

– Sunday Worship Service

-11:00 a.m.

– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Teacher Ross Kok has accepted the call to Holy Cross of Phoenix. Pastor Mark Tiefel is considering the call to Immanuel of Mankato. Teacher Amy Mielke has returned the call to Messiah of Eau Claire. Faith of Markesan has called Teacher Matthew Thurow.

Mission Helper Trip – 17 Mission Helpers leave tomorrow for Nepal, where they will spend the next three weeks sharing the gospel with approx. 1,500 children in various Himalayan villages. Pastoral training classes will also be taught. You can follow along with the Mission Helpers through the trip blog at: <http://2017clcmhtnepal.blogspot.com/> Your prayers would certainly be appropriate.

Quarterly Voters' Meeting – A Quarterly Voters' meeting has been scheduled for this morning following the fellowship time. All voting members are encouraged to attend. The Church Council is also scheduled to hold a short meeting after the Voters' Meeting.

Pastor Out of Town – Pastor Roehl is scheduled to help with a remodeling project in Eau Claire, departing today and returning Wednesday.