

Sermon: 7-6-08, Pentecost Season

Pastor Phil Lee

Title: "Prisoners of Hope"

Text: Zechariah 9:9-12; (Rom.7:19-24; Mt.11:28-30)

Theme: The foundation of our hope is Jesus, crucified and risen.

Introduction

- In this great Presidential campaign and election year, we are facing serious struggles as a nation. The economy is sluggish, we have many social problems, the cost of gas and food is going through the roof, and we continue to be mired down in a war in Iraq. Times like this raise a question that returns to us time and time again: What is the foundation for our hopes and dreams? Or, to frame the question personally: What is the basis for your hope? Is it the stock market? Or maybe it's the condition of your health? Or maybe your hope is rooted in being a citizen of this great country and, therefore, you base your optimism on the direction our country is going.
- As many are aware, Presidential contender, Senator Barack Obama, has written a book entitled The Audacity of Hope. The title of the book was derived from a sermon delivered by Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, and it represents Obama's personal vision for his 2008 campaign for the Presidency. Obama delivered the keynote address, entitled "The Audacity of Hope," at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, and it propelled him to national prominence. In his speech, Obama said: "Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or a politics of hope? ...I'm not talking about blind optimism here...No, I'm talking about something more substantial...Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope!"
- Long ago, our forefathers gave concrete expression to the hope they had for the great experiment that is America. In the preamble of the Declaration of Independence we read these definitive words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." And past Friday, we once again celebrated the great liberty and freedom and hope that we cherish as a nation.
- But, let me ask the question again: On what, after all, do we base our hopes and dreams? Or, to frame the question personally: What is the basis for your hope?

Point

- Go back in time with me for a brief history lesson on hope that sets the context for today's OT lesson from Zechariah 9:9-12. For roughly 100 years (540-430 B.C.) after the Israelites were set free from their Babylonian captivity, they returned home in different groups to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem and restore their worship life. It was during this time that God called Zechariah to the prophetic office in 520 B.C. But, the Israelites didn't experience a long period of peace before Alexander the Great came calling in the late 4th century BC (333-332). As usual, Israel was squeezed in the vice between more powerful nations.
- It was sometime during this historical process that Zechariah spoke a message of hope to the Israelites, saying: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey...he shall command peace to the nations...Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope..."

- The struggle of the ancient Israelites, who were mired in hopelessness in their time of exile in Babylon, and rejoiced in new-found freedom when they were released, and were later threatened by the powerful armies of Alexander – this is a template for the struggle of all humanity. War, imprisonment, freedom, peace. It happens on the grand scale of history, as nation collides with nation. But, it also happens within every human heart – war, imprisonment, freedom, peace.
- And so, Zechariah’s prophecy is a message is for us today: “Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope...”

Problem

- But, in today’s NT lesson – Romans 7 – the apostle Paul describes the human condition – the human quandary – before God: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”
- Here, Paul gives heartbreaking expression to the hopeless spiritual war and imprisonment that is at the core of every human life.
- This reminds me of an incident that I witnessed two weeks ago while Carolyn and I were sitting in the upstairs section of a café in St. Petersburg, Russia. We were waiting for the server to bring our order of coffee and diet Coke when she came cheerfully bounding up the steps. But, when she came to the last step she miscalculated, missing it by a fraction, which caused her to trip and sent her sprawling on the floor with our coffee and soda flying everywhere. She was mortified, and in spite of our efforts to console her, she quickly fled to the bathroom where she could be heard crying quite loudly.
- We are fallen creatures, and our sin leaves us painfully short of God’s glory. What the apostle Paul said is true for all of us: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.” In our thoughts, words, and deeds, we have done what we should not have done, and we have not done what we should have done.
- And so the questions return: What, after all, is the foundation for our hopes and dreams? Or, to frame the question personally: What is the basis for your hope? Surely not your fallen self!

Power

- It is into the dilemma of our inner spiritual war and hopeless brokenness that the ancient words of Zechariah come wafting like a cool breeze on a scorching hot day: “Rejoice... Shout aloud...! (Dance for joy, people of Glendale!) ...your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he...he shall command peace to the nations...Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope...”
- What does this mean for us? All four Gospels identify the events of what we call Palm Sunday as the fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy (Matt. 21; Mark 11; Luke 19; John 12). We identify the one who rode into Jerusalem on that donkey as the long-awaited Messiah, promised in the writings of the Old Testament.
- As Christians, we are people who confess that this Jesus who was crucified and raised from the dead, is our Messiah and King. We confess that through his death and resurrection this Jesus has saved us from sin, death, and all the powers of evil. We are

those people who thank God for sending Jesus the Messiah into the world for us so that we need not live hopelessly haunted by sin and guilt and so that death will not be our end.

Conclusion

- Our hope is in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen! He is the one who has personally invited every troubled soul who is bending under the weight of trouble and despair: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest...rest for your souls.” (Mt.11:28-29)
- And so, we join the apostle Paul, and all prisoners of hope, in saying: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom.7:25) Amen.