



Immanuel Lutheran Church

Transcript from March 28, 2021 sermon preached by Rev. Tab Ottmers

The text for our sermon on this Palm Sunday comes from the Old Testament reading from Zechariah chapter nine. Verse nine and verse 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."

"Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double."

So, today begins the week where we, as the people of God, intentionally turn our hearts and minds toward the events that really define the driving force behind our life. You could say the most important events in our lives. We remember this and we begin it on Palm Sunday, where we see a parade. We see a parade and today I would like--with what the Old Testament reading from Zachariah says--to consider this title for us as Christians: that we are Prisoners of Hope. Prisoners of hope who have a humble King.

Every summer my brother and I would spend weeks with my grandparents in a small hill country town of Kingsland, Texas. Quaint town, one stoplight. Your run of the mill small town. Kingsland though, on the Fourth of July, attracted people from all the other small towns. They had a celebration called Aqua Boom, because it culminated on July 4, that evening with a giant firework show. And then, of course, the morning of the Fourth of July, there would be the parade. It was a nice time to celebrate. The best part of the parade, of course, was the hope that we would catch some of the candy that the VFW float would throw out. Or the smarties that the firemen from the volunteer fire department would throw to us kids patiently waiting on the curb. That really is the best part of any parade, the sweet gifts that we hope to get thrown to us. Rowdy kids, with parents still drinking their morning coffee. Sometimes, sitting in those parades, I wished it would never end. But it did point us to something greater. And I think that greater thing is the celebration of freedom and hope we have in Christ. That this week Palm Sunday begins with a parade.

A parade, but it's not a normal parade. There are children, there are adults, people waiting in expectation. Some perhaps thought it was a political parade. Something like the Fourth of July, something you just celebrate every year, and it really only depends on where you live. Your government could turn against you and take everything away. Not so with the people of God. Your freedom cannot be taken away by anything or anyone. Other people who were gathered there probably knew that there was something more at stake and that's why they cried out. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. They knew that this was more than just an earthly kingdom or a political maneuver. But the beginning of



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Passion Week we start with a parade of hope for the prisoners of hope. A parade which will end in a funeral procession of sorts. That people will follow not a dead corpse, but they'll follow a man who knows his death is looming as he carries his cross. A parade on Sunday, a bloody procession to death on Friday. But, that Sunday, it all gave way to a new parade. Another parade, of sorts, that you and I are still marching in today. A parade for prisoners of hope.

A fourth of July parade is the acknowledgement that the gift of freedom requires sacrifice, a principle built upon the very gospel itself. That because Jesus Christ had died for the sins of the world, those who believe in are baptized, they are free from sin and death. That the power of the devil can don't touch you. The power of the kingdoms of this world that come and go, what are they to us? But this victory was not without cost. There is a cost. And the cost for freedom is life. Before Easter there's Good Friday. Before Easter baskets and sweet treats, before you can have a parade, a price had to have been paid. Before the sweet treats of Easter, the bitter drink of the cup of God's wrath Jesus drinks on the cross. The parade leads to the procession that leads us to follow Christ. That we are, as prisoners of hope, in a constant parade carrying our cross. He picked up his cross, he was led to golgotha, that we would pick up our crosses and be led with him. That we are zachariah says prisoners of hope.

So let's look at that term a little bit. Prisoners of hope. It comes from our Old Testament reading in Zechariah, and I think it's a great phrase for us today as we reflect on Palm Sunday. Prisoners of hope has an acknowledgment that things, well, they're not as they should be. We wouldn't need the word hope if everything were perfect. There would be no need for hope. St. Paul says in Romans eight, "who hopes for what he can already see?" But we are prisoners of hope. We know who we belong too. We know what God says. But we don't fully experience the kingdom of God yet. Things do not look as God promises that they finally will. So we still have hope. We still have faith that what we see and feel, well, it's not always reality. And what a great Sunday to remember that. On Palm Sunday, as Jesus enters Jerusalem just like Zechariah said he would, even to the point of the method of his arrival. Zechariah not only gets his mode of arrival right--sitting on the donkey--but I think we also should take note that there's another detail there that benefits us greatly as prisoners of hope. He says he's going to come on a donkey, but he also says that he is humble.

An exact description of how the savior is going to come into Jerusalem hundreds of years later. Yes, it's wonderful we see it fulfilled on the donkey but what I want you to grab on to today, as a prisoner of hope, is that your God is humble. That's also an exact prophecy that Zechariah got right. Zechariah telling the people of God--when he prophesied this to them, his current audience as he's saying this, Zechariah is telling people who were literal prisoners in a foreign land--he says don't give up you prisoners of hope. You are the people of God by faith, and no matter where you are you belong to him. You can imagine how hard it was for the people Zechariah was prophesying to to have hope. It was the Babylonian exile. God's people had been prisoners and Babylon for two generations. They hadn't seen nor even heard a good parade in 70 years. The last parade they knew was the Babylonians leading them into captivity with chains. They marched them with flesh pierced with hooks. This time period that our



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reading is from is as God begins, through his prophet, to reveal his plan of rescue. A return to Jerusalem. Their being released from exile to go back home. A parade of return. A parade of freedom.

And the people might have been tempted to think that this return to Jerusalem, that this was it. That this is the fulfillment of God's promises that the prophet has just said. That they have political freedom, they're back at their homeland, they can go back to the temple, they can rule themselves, they can do what they want. But Zechariah, he puts an end to that. He says, no, the king that God will send on a donkey, who will be humble, he isn't going to just rule in Jerusalem. But his reign will be a kingdom that will stretch over the whole world. The prophet warns the people to think that their return to Jerusalem, this is not the last action of God, because it's going to get taken away again. Zechariah is pointing these people, who had all of this hope in front of them coming home, Zechariah says no. Yes, it is wonderful that God is giving us our homeland back. But this is not what you were hoping for. Don't get wrapped up in the earthly blessings that God gives you that you forsake the faith.

Zechariah is pointing to the event that we are celebrating today. He says, keep the faith. Because when you see the king coming on a donkey who is humble, there, you will see the hope that you prisoners have held. And just as it was hard for the people in Zechariah's time, just as it was hard for the people gathered in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, just as it was hard for them, to keep the faith and have hope, I think the same is for us. You can imagine God's people being foreigners and Babylon, a culture not focused on the true God but rampant with sin and unbelief, not a care for leading lives of holiness. Not only that, but they couldn't even go to the temple, it was destroyed. Their country was nothing. In addition, Babylon offered a nice living. A place where you can raise your kids and tell them, you have a future. It might be without God. But hey, you'll have a good job and life will be great. Many of the people, no longer were they prisoners of hope. They gave up. They began to live just as the Babylonians. They gave up hope. They thought that God had forgotten. Instead of being prisoners of hope, they became prisoners of sadness. Prisoners of disappointment with God, because their eyes were looking toward all that sparkles in this world. They became prisoners of sadness, prisoners of forgetfulness, prisoners of giving up, prisoners of unbelief.

And that's a warning for us. Because we can be tempted to feel the same way in our day as well. Maybe it's sin, in the weight of temptation, that has imprisoned you. Maybe it's that one sin that you just can't seem to shake. Maybe it's others who mistreat you, or a dead end job, or you just feel like life doesn't have much meaning. The devil is tempting you to give up your hope. Because it is, just as it was for those in the Babylonian exile, it's much easier to follow the culture of today. It's always the devil's tool to use against hope. Here in the world, life does not depend on hope, but proof. If something doesn't prove itself, we move on to the next more reliable things. Cars, appliances. Hope doesn't help you get your job. So often, that's the temptation with the faith. We think God sometimes is hopeless because he just doesn't work how we want him to. Or we have unrealistic expectations. Imagine Simon of Cyrene from our Gospel reading, standing there watching this parade, this procession. Innocent, standing there doing nothing. And God gives him a heavy cross. Is this the kind of God he is ready to follow?



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So, too, in our lives, God will bestow on your back a cross. Whether it's now or whether it's later. Our Lord promises. He promises to give us crosses so that our faith would be strengthened. So we can see in the example of Simon, picking up his cross, being a prisoner of hope, and following Jesus. We need to be aware, that we do not become prisoners of disappointment. That is why the people in Jerusalem were so eager to call out to Him on Palm Sunday. Some were not hopeful for a long time, some had given up. But now comes someone who everyone says can do something about it. Here comes someone to bring hope. They even quoted, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. These people they were prisoners too. But on that day, on Palm Sunday, they remembered that there is hope. Did they all know what Jesus was coming to do? Probably not. But for those who remembered God's word, they remembered that this king would come on a donkey. And Jesus, he fulfilled that. He came, not on a giant stallion. He came, not with the greatest kings and all the people from the government. But he came on a royal beast of burden. Fulfilling Zecharia's prophecy in regards to the donkey. But now you also see, he's humble.

And that's good for us. That we have a humble King, who comes to his people. That he doesn't stay far away. But his concern is to fulfill every last prophecy to show you that you can trust him. Even if it means giving up his only son, so that you would not give up hope. At least the people knew that Jesus was coming as a royal figure of sorts. He came bringing a message of hope to prisoners of sin and death. Prisoners to the unknown. Prisoners of sadness. Prisoners of depression and anxiety. Anyone who needed a savior from sin and death. This is who your humble King comes to free. He doesn't come with lightning and power and guns blazing, looking to kill his enemies. But he comes to die for his enemies, to free them from the grip of sin. He doesn't come to give political victory. We see how unpredictable that can be. Kingdoms come and go. But when Jesus comes on Palm Sunday, he's beginning a new parade. A parade that begins an unending kingdom. A kingdom built not on the defeat of sinners, but built upon his shed blood on the cross. And he brings sinners into this parade with him.

He calls you by the gospel to follow. Because, you see, at the end of that parade, everybody went home. But he didn't. At the end of that parade, real freedom began. Freedom for us. There was a sacrifice, a parade that ended with the death of God's Son. But the gift of life was thrown to the whole world. We are prisoners of hope, because hope, it doesn't put us to shame.

So this week, remember that we are still marching in a parade of sorts. We are still prisoners of hope. God's kingdom has not yet fully realized except by faith. But he will show you. You will see with your eyes that Jesus, he even comes to us. He is with us. It isn't really a parade that he's in our midst now. But he does give out gifts to us. Gifts of eternal life. Gifts in his body and blood. Humble means. That just as the world looked at him, as we heard in our Gospel reading, they looked at him and marked him. They said this looks doesn't look like any king. Well, neither does this. But the gifts that he gives, the gifts



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that he was accomplishing there on the cross with eyes of faith. This is what we're willing to sacrifice everything for.

Gifts of faith. Faith and the promises that he's spoken to you in your baptism, where he brought you into his parade. He still comes in humble ways. His word and sacrament. Ways that require faith to see the true glory that he brings. So stay steadfast in that, you prisoners of hope. Do not give up, for he is still coming to bring you true and everlasting freedom. And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.