

“Prisoners of Hope, Pioneer of Peace”
Pentecost 6(A) – *Communion, Outside*

Texts: Zechariah 9:9-12
Romans 5:1-5

Preached: 7/9/17

Sporcle is a trivia quiz website, providing what it calls "mentally stimulating diversions." You can find all manner of games that require you to answer a series of questions against a clock, and many of them are quite challenging.

One of these quizzes deals with 15 important peace treaties. The website gives you the years the treaties were signed and what they accomplished. You have six minutes to come up with the 15 treaty names.

For example: What's the 1721 treaty that ended the Great Northern War between Sweden and Russia? The answer is the Treaty of Nystad.

Or,

What's the 1814 treaty that officially ended the War of 1812? The answer is the Treaty of Ghent.

Or,

What's the 1848 treaty that ended the Mexican-American War? The answer is The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

If you didn't get those three, the other 12 aren't any easier. There have been a lot of historic agreements, pacts, contracts and national agreements for peace. One website lists all of the known peace accords since 1283 B.C. If you were to print that list, single space, it would require 63 sheets of paper! The 20th century alone has 271 treaties.

Most of us don't need to remember any of those treaties – they've come and gone. Some have lived long enough to remember a particular peace accord – one that was significant. We are fortunate and blessed to live in a country where national peace has mostly been a norm. But we yearn for more than political peace.

We yearn for peace in our communities and among our friends. We dream of family peace and peace within ourselves. That peace is offered to us in Jesus Christ – our pioneer of peace.

In this morning's Old Testament reading -- The Prophet Zechariah imagines a king who will come and proclaim peace. If those words sounded familiar to you, it's because you have heard them before, always on Palm Sunday – as we are envisioning Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem...you know... where some have cut branches, palm fronds, and are waving them ecstatically...and the crowd is shouting, "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Jesus entered the city riding a donkey – which fits nicely with Zechariah's vision.

But Zechariah and his writing belongs to a period long before Christ – to a time when God’s people had been released from captivity in Babylon. They had returned to their homeland, to the land flowing with milk and honey, the home of their ancestors, but found the place in shambles. Although they were free from Babylon, they now found themselves captives to the Persian Empire, who had rescued them. They still had no guarantee of security, with other powerful empires looking down on them. They feared being scattered once again.

God spoke to their fears through his prophet. Zechariah announces a peace treaty God has imposed on those nations. The messiah arrives "triumphant and victorious," yet also "humble, riding on a donkey" for he's the proclaimer not of his own accomplishment, but of peace to the nations, a peace that God's judgment has made possible, a comprehensive peace and a holistic peace.

But there must have been doubters in Zechariah’s time – just like there are doubters in our own time...as there were in Jesus’ time. The doubters, the naysayers, the humbuggers, the criticizers might have said to Zechariah "The prophets have been saying that peace stuff forever, where's the progress? There's always war somewhere, and we have no reason to think human nature is going to suddenly change."

Perhaps each one of us can identify with that kind of pessimistic mood more easily than we would like to admit. The fact that there've been so many peace treaties over the years, right down to the present time, reminds us that conflicts keep cropping up, whether our country is involved in them or not. The idea of a whole world at peace sounds wonderful, but is it achievable given the perversity in the human heart? Can there be peace in the Middle East? Can there be peace in Syria? Can there be peace with the purveyors of radical Islam?

Or, closer to home – can there be peace in the face of a long-held family feud? Can there be peace between husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend, sister and brother...peace in the workplace, peace between the races, peace between those who disagree vehemently and are convinced that the other side is patently wrong?

It’s not unrealistic to suggest, in the face of real and bitter conflict, “No – there cannot be peace.” The problem of nations or the problem of interpersonal relations or the problem of the inner self – all can be overwhelming and we become prisoners of despair – not seeing a way out and not believing there can be a way.

But look what Zechariah says – he uses an odd term that surprises us! The prophet says for God, "As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. (Imagine being trapped at the bottom of a cistern – the kind of place Joseph was cast by his brothers – for flaunting his coat of many colors – way back in the Book of Genesis.)

I will set you free from the waterless pit...Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.”

I’m intrigued by the prophet’s use of this strange term...”prisoners of hope.” Once God rescues, the people will be called “prisoners of hope.” In Christ, the pioneer of peace, we can no longer be prisoners of despair, victims of the naysayer’s propaganda, for we, too, are prisoners of hope.

The Hebrew word used here for hope is *tiqvah* – it literally means a cord – something to hang on to. Imagine the rope tied to a bucket associated with all deep wells.

Zechariah is not the only prophet fond of the word *tiqvah* – hope. I think of Jeremiah – who speaks for God to the exiles before they have come home – one of my favorite texts in all of scripture: I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future with *tiqvah* -- hope.

The poet Emily Dickinson famously wrote:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers --
That perches in the soul --
And sings the tune without the words --
And never stops -- at all

And the more contemporary author, Rebecca Solnit, says of hope: it is not "like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. ... Hope is rather an ax with which you break down doors in an emergency..."

We live in a world where ongoing peace is elusive, but remains the promise of God, a world where real hope is a precious commodity. Like Zechariah, the Apostle Paul links peace with hope.

He writes to the Romans, "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Christ gives us access to God's grace – which gives us hope, although only through the day-to-day practicalities of faithful living, which is a process, sometimes grueling. Paul lays it out like this: suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...

We cannot be prisoners of suffering – although many of us have the right to label ourselves that way – given our family situation, or our handicap, or our inner demons, or what we've been through, or the hardships we face.

We cannot be prisoners of suffering – because suffering is not an end – it's the beginning of the process, however painful and taxing. We cannot be prisoners of suffering – because we are prisoners of hope, and hope does not disappoint us, the Apostle points out, "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

I spent my recent vacation in Ecuador, my first time to South America. In the Andes mountains there is an old story about a farmer who rescued two abandoned eagle chicks. The farmer gently cradled the chicks, brought them to his home and lovingly nurtured them. He did everything in his power to raise them as eagles and intended to let them fly away as soon as they were able. Both eagles grew fast and strong under his care. They would perch on a large branch outside his house, flapping their wings, getting closer to flight. And then it happened, one of the eagles stretched out his wings, lifted off from his perch and took to the air. The great bird swooped low to the ground, but soon gained height. It circled the farmstead higher and higher and finally headed back to the mountains.

The farmer watched the other eagle intently, waiting for that day, too, when it would leave the branch. But days went by and then weeks. No manner of coaxing could persuade the second eagle to fly. The farmer tried everything he could think of, but nothing worked. There on the branch, the eagle remained. Desperate, the farmer knew of a wise man who lived on the other side of the mountain and he sent him word of his dilemma and asked if the man might perhaps come and give assistance. The wise man agreed that he would come. A week later the farmer greeted an old man with gray hair. "Where is the bird?" inquired the wise man. – and the farmer pointed to the branch, where the eagle still sat. I've tried everything, the farmer reiterated.

He watched the wise man cross the property and approach the eagle. The wise man had no sooner reached the branch, when in a very short time the eagle swooped and began to gain altitude, circling the farmer high above several times, before heading to the mountains.

Astounded, the farmer ran to the wise man. What did you say to the eagle? He replied, "I didn't say anything...I simply cut the branch."

Our guide, and now my friend, Jorge Castillo, shared the ancient story. It speaks to me of hope, of persevering when things seem impossible, of suffering (your branch being cut) and imprisonment not being the last word. It was not the last word for the farmer, nor for the eagle...and it is not the last word for us.

If we are prisoners, we are prisoners of hope, confident that Christ, the pioneer of peace will lead us to well-being.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.