

Zechariah 9:9-12

We see the word *prisoner* by itself, and we see the word *hope* by itself; but, as a rule, we do not see these two words together. Prisons are not places associated with hope. More like drudgery, despair, frustration, hopelessness. “Prisoners without hope” seems to be a more suitable term. Yet “*prisoners of hope*” is here before us in our text. “*I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit; return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will return to you double.*” Who are these prisoners of which the prophet Zechariah speaks? What is this waterless pit from which they are freed? And what does all this have to do with Palm Sunday?

God’s people were not in slavery when these words were written. They had returned from bondage - a seventy year captivity. So the prophet’s words are symbolic in meaning. The waterless pit is not an actual hole in the ground in which there is no H₂O. It stands for something that is spiritual. The prisoners are not being held captive by physical restraints, but the meaning is of a spiritual nature.

Yet our physical body is so closely united to our spirit that touching one touches the other. When our spirit is lifted, our physical body responds positively. When our physical body is dealing with sorrow and despair, our spirit can become downcast. Not until death are the body and spirit separated. Until that time they are joined together as one.

There are many Christians today, and we may be among them, who are living as prisoners. Whether these are in actual physical prisons or not doesn’t matter. Depression can create a prison far worse than one made of steel bars. So can the addiction to drugs, as can the emotional scars of a lifetime of abuse at the hands of another.

There is a prison so horrible that the prophet calls it a waterless pit. It is dry, having nothing good in it. No joy or peace exists there; no comfort or assurance, and no hope. This is the prison created by one’s guilty conscience. A prison in which one lives in fear of God, fear of punishment.

A Christian is driven into this waterless pit when he falls into sin and knows only the harsh threats and accusations of the Law, but not the sweet promises of the Gospel. It is a waterless pit because this Christian has left the cleansing waters of his baptism. He may recall his baptism into Christ, but this merely serves to remind him how far he has fallen away from Christ.

“*Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope,*” cries the prophet. This stronghold is the Lord. It’s our baptism into Christ. It is *your* stronghold, not another’s stronghold, for Jesus is your Lord, and it is your baptism that remains your refuge, your place of safety in Christ always. No matter how far a Christian has fallen into the waterless pit, he can always return to his baptism, to his stronghold; because although we can leave our baptism, our baptism never leaves us.

A sinner who is trapped within the prison of the Law, attacked by his own conscience, does not live in hope; not when he lives without the comfort of Christ. We would surely be shocked to know just how many live like this, and how many of these prisoners are Christians. It’s not that they no longer believe in God. It’s how they perceive Him.

Our text in Zechariah uses two different animals to explain. “*Rejoice,*” he begins, “*your king is coming to you...on a donkey.*” This is strikingly important. The Jews rode on donkeys, not horses. A donkey was the mode of travel for all of daily life. Horses, on the other hand, were reserved for the military. If a horse and its rider was coming, there was cause for concern. The one mounted on a horse came carrying sword and bow; he came prepared for battle.

When God comes with His accusing Law, He comes riding on a horse. The Law strikes us and pierces us to the heart. It kills us, says the Apostle Paul, in a spiritual sense. We all need this battle horse to come to us, for daily we sin against God and each other. We need to be cut to the heart so that we repent.

Yet if all we know of God is that He rides on a war horse, we will become prisoners without hope. Either we will despair of life and lose hope in God, or we will become Pharisees and place our hope in our works, our efforts, our goodness, but this is a false hope.

And so Jesus comes on Palm Sunday riding on a donkey. He rides upon an actual, living donkey, but this is also of significant meaning. We are to understand from this that Jesus always rides on a donkey. He does not ride a war horse to you. He comes to you on a donkey. He comes to you humbly. He comes not with sword and bow in His hands, but with nail marks in His hands. Jesus comes to *speaking peace to the nations* says Zechariah. He comes having salvation to give to you. Jesus comes not to do battle with you on account of your sins. He comes to forgive you of all your sins.

“*Return to the Lord your God,*” we sing in Lent, “*for He is gracious and merciful; slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*” This is a perfect parallel to our text. “*Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope.*” Why? Because God has not abandoned you. His sweet promises, all of them, are for you. His blood sealed God’s covenant with you. Your offenses are covered. Jesus’ blood washes them away. You are forgiven.

“*Today,*” God says, “*I declare to you that I will restore to you double.*” One who is a prisoner understands this. It is evil that imprisons us. The evil around us; the evil within us. What good is it, therefore, to be set free from the waterless pit only to have to face such evils again? And so God promises a double blessing. To restore His prisoners of hope, setting them free, and also keeping them safe from all the evils that want to imprison us again.

Jesus comes on a donkey to you, and He unleashes His war horses upon those who are against you. The evil one cannot accuse you; not when you are safe in Christ. Your own sins cannot speak evil against you, for you live upon the stronghold of your baptism.

Whatever has imprisoned you, now or in the past, you are one who can rejoice and shout aloud. No evil can befall you. No waterless pit can hold you. Whether you are living physically restrained or not, you are prisoners of hope. Your hope is in the Lord. He rides His donkey to you today. He brings to you His double blessing, and no one can take this from you. Amen.