

## **Sermon, July 5, 2020**

Good morning! Welcome again to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back the multi-talented Beachy family, who serve as music ministers in our church.

We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases are spiking again nationally, and many, if not most of our members are either in or spend time with friends and family members who are in high risk groups. We do not want to endanger any of them unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission work and benevolence commitments during these difficult and unprecedented times, there is now a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is [stmarksoakland.com](http://stmarksoakland.com) (no spaces or caps)

Meanwhile we are resuming the Adult Forum on a virtual online basis. We are discussing Race and Racism in America, like the rest of the nation is or at least should be doing right now. If you are interested, call the church office and we will send you the link to join. You can participate even without internet access if you have a smart phone or a friend or family member who does. If you are not sure how, call the office and we will put you in touch with someone who is smarter than I am about such things.

Now today's Stupid Joke: My friend had another job interview last week. The HR director said to her, "You were in your last job for twenty years. Why did you leave?" She said, "It was something the boss said to me." The director said, "You were there for twenty years and left over something your boss said?" She said, "Yes." He asked, "Well what exactly did he say?" She replied, "He said you're fired."

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## *Music*

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The Lord be with you. Let us pray. You are great, O God, and greatly to be praised. You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Grant that we may believe in you, call upon you, know you and serve you, through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, **Amen.**

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### **A Reading from Zechariah, the ninth chapter.**

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 will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double. Here ends the reading.

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### **The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the eleventh chapter.**

[Jesus spoke to the crowd, saying]"To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 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. "

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

### **The Gospel of the Lord.**

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**Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.**

Our church reached a milestone this past week. Fifty years ago one of the ELCA's predecessor bodies changed the word "man" to "person" in its constitution and bylaws. Other predecessor bodies soon followed suit, and this past week we celebrated a half century of Lutheran ministry shared equally by men and women. Sure, some folks like me think that should have happened five hundred years ago when the Lutheran Church was born. And I freely admit that gender equality in theory has not always been gender equality in practice. Still we can celebrate that, unlike most Christians even today, our church is at least on the right path.

It certainly is an odd collection of readings assigned on this the fifth Sunday after Pentecost. If you can find an overarching theme or even a common thread running through them, then good for you. I couldn't. At least at first.

But fortunately for me, today is the ONLY time in the three-year cycle of the lectionary that we read anything from the Old Testament book of Zechariah, so let's talk about that.

The verses we read certainly sound familiar. Scholars recognize them as the very ones that shaped especially Matthew's story of Palm Sunday, where a triumphant-yet-humble messianic figure (in Matthew's case Jesus) INDEED did ride into town peacefully on a donkey as Zechariah described.

I also learned some interesting trivia regarding verse ten. A 17<sup>th</sup> century King James Bible translator's decision to render the Hebrew word *l #mas* "dominion" is actually responsible for the official name of our neighbor to the north.

Back in 1864 the Fathers of the Confederation read Zechariah's description of God's land as extending from sea to sea and from the river to the land's end. They thought "man—that sounds just like Canada! You know—from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the St. Lawrence to the Arctic Tundra. And the "mashal" or "Dominion" of Canada has been the country's official name ever since.

Of course there's more to Zechariah than just Palm Sunday and Canada. Zechariah is one of the *trei asar*—or "the twelve"—meaning the twelve Minor Prophets whose books are part of the Hebrew Bible, which is our Old Testament.

Remember the word "Minor" in Minor Prophets refers only to the length of the books and not their relative importance to our faith understanding. This book is credited to a prophet named "Zechariah," one of several Old and New Testament figures to bear that name, including the father of John the Baptist.

Zechariah the Prophet was also a Priest. Dating most of the books of the Bible usually involves considerable conjecture. But not so Zechariah. The book dates itself during the reign of Persian King Darius, and more

specifically to sometime between October in the year 520 BCE and December of 518.

Zechariah literally means “God has remembered,” and it’s pretty clear from the book exactly WHAT God had remembered: the holy Temple in the city of Jerusalem. It was the beautiful and inspirational center of their culture, religion, faith practices and time-honored traditions. Said temple, however, by this time had lain in ruins for more than sixty years. And while GOD may have remembered the Temple, most of the PEOPLE by this time apparently forgot about it.

They’d been authorized by the great Persian liberator Cyrus to rebuild their temple nearly twenty years earlier, but they somehow just hadn’t gotten around to it. The book indicates God was NOT pleased by that delay.

So God called Zechariah and his contemporary prophet Haggai to demand the people begin the restoration work of the temple and the rest of the destroyed city.

Both prophets insisted the community could never again be whole without its temple. Sure-- the way God’s people treat each other and strangers is of primary importance to our God. But maintaining the sacred spaces, and sacred times of the religious calendar; keeping the culture, history, faith traditions and religious rituals alive is important too. Maybe not so much for God’s sake, but for our own well-being.

Be it Church or Mosque; Temple, Synagogue, Ashram or sweat lodge, the hierotopy, or “sacred spaces” of religion, have been important to human civilizations since the beginning of time.

They are the places where communities are formed, relationships made meaningful, identities shaped and missions defined. That’s what makes it that much tougher on many of us these days ,with our beautiful building and worship space essentially closed.

Because Sacred Space isn't merely the place you go to find answers. It is also where people gather to ask questions, tell stories and carry on conversations. The Sacred Spaces of religion—like this one-- are where rituals are repeated, prayers are prayed, songs are sung and dances performed. (Although not in our case, because we're Lutherans, and everybody knows Lutherans can't dance.)

I often hear friends and even some of my own family members say things like, "You don't need a church to be a Christian." But sorry. Folks like Zechariah, Haggai, the Apostle Paul, Jesus and most modern sociocultural anthropologists disagree.

They're all pretty sure, "Yeah, we kind of do" need sacred spaces. They are the very places where two or more gather in God's name to celebrate triumphs and offer comfort and consolation in life's many difficult times of hardship and loss.

These are the places where communities are formed, and we get a real sense that God truly IS with us. Just as he promised to be.

Cultural anthropologists say life just isn't the same without sacred time, and sacred space. It lacks rhythm. It is void of texture. People just go through the motions, wondering, "Is this really all there is?"

Religious Historian Jonathan Z. Smith calls Sacred Space the focusing lens for transformative meaning. It is where we feel closer not only to God, but also to our ancestors and to loved ones no longer with us. Lack of such a place was certainly a problem in and around 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE Jerusalem. And arguably these days, in and around 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

In response to the impassioned pleas of folks like Haggai and Zechariah, the Jerusalem community finally woke up. And stepped-up. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah indicate the new temple and city walls were completed and dedicated in just a matter of months. There again was joy and thanksgiving among the people. And singing and dancing in the

streets and marketplace. And that's about all I have to say about our reading from Zechariah this morning.

But the thought of that celebration, and singing and dancing in the streets and marketplace that it invoked brought me back to Matthew chapter eleven, and the so-called Parable of the Children in the Market Place. And maybe to a cohesive thread that runs through today's readings after all. One commentary I read called the Parable of the Children in the Marketplace the Parable of the Spoiled Brats. Apparently he read it a little differently from the way I do.

Just so you understand, the major occasion for flute playing and dancing in the ancient Near East was a wedding. And the occasion for wailing and mourning was, of course, a funeral.

Today Jesus was comparing his good news preaching of hope and forgiveness with the bad news doomsday prophecy of John the Baptist.—John being the Gospels' "Gloomy Gus" of sorts.

He was constantly warning of impending judgment and sadness. You know—like you might expect at a funeral. Meanwhile Jesus had taken a different tack, preaching the joyful Good News of the gospel. Like you might hear at a wedding. About the happy times that lie ahead of us. When the slave will be freed, the hungry satisfied and the last will be first.

The commentaries I read suggested Jesus was complaining that both he and John were largely being ignored by the people. But I wonder if instead there wasn't more to it than that.

Comparing adults to children in the ancient Near East probably did NOT invoke images of child-like innocence or youthful exuberance. Childhood in antiquity was in fact a perilous time. Theirs was a dangerous world, in which children were the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Infant mortality ran as high as thirty

percent, with another third of those who survived birth lost before age six.

Sixty percent of all children born didn't see their sixteenth birthdays. Recent estimates say seventy percent of surviving children lost one or both parents before reaching puberty. Old age in their culture was rare, and highly venerated. Youth, by comparison, was a time of worry and fear.

So I doubt Jesus was really scolding his followers for acting like clueless children. I suspect he was instead warning them that the adult world around them was **STILL** a very frightening place. John was right—there are dangers ahead. But Jesus was also correct—the kingdom is coming so hang in there, because in the end **YOU WILL** be a part of it.

In the meantime, celebrate life's triumphs together and comfort each other in times of loss. Jesus will indeed be with us in the holy times and sacred spaces. But also in the not-so-holy times and places outside these walls.

So take his yoke upon you, and learn from him; for he **IS** gentle and humble in heart, and even amidst all the tragedy and chaos around us, we **WILL**, through him, find rest for our souls. Because **HIS** yoke **IS** easy, and his burden...light."

**Amen**

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