

Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024

ZECHARIAH 9:9–10. (EHV)

Rejoice greatly, Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
Look! Your King is coming to you.
He is righteous and brings salvation.
He is humble and is riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the horse from Jerusalem.
The battle bow will be taken away,
and he will proclaim peace to the nations.
His kingdom will extend from sea to sea,
from the River to the ends of the earth.

Circumstances in our lives certainly make us smile from time to time, maybe even regularly. But how often do you get a chance to “rejoice greatly” and “shout” for joy? I think of rejoicing greatly as taking place at a wedding and especially at a wedding reception. I think of shouting for joy as taking place when a young person gets an acceptance letter from a prestigious college, or finds out that his or her best friend is engaged, or when the winning basket is sunk by your favorite team as time expires on the clock. Those things happen, but they don’t happen very often for each individual person.

This morning Zechariah reminds us that the events of this day, Palm Sunday, should make all of us rejoice greatly and shout for joy, yes, even greater and more loudly than in any of those other situations.

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! Look! Your king is coming to you. He is righteous and brings salvation. He is humble and is riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The Judeans and residents of Jerusalem had been carried off into captivity by the Babylonians in 587 BC. In 538 BC, forty-nine years later, after the Persians had defeated the Babylonians, King Cyrus the Great of Persia issued a proclamation allowing the Judeans to return to rebuild their temple, and more than 42,000 Judeans took him up on that offer. The prophet Zechariah began his activity eighteen years after that.

So by the time Zechariah addresses these words to the residents of Jerusalem, it had been nearly seventy years since a king had lived there.

But now, “Look! Your king is coming to you.” A king will come to Jerusalem again, and not the king of another people, but “your [own] king,” Zechariah says. This was certainly reason to rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

That he was righteous and bringing salvation was also a reason for them to rejoice, although their joy at this time might have been misinformed. They might have misunderstood how this king would exercise his justice and how he would save and deliver them, especially if they did not keep reading or listening. They might have been thinking about vengeance on the Persians ruling over them and salvation from their rule. But whatever the case, those who believed Zechariah certainly rejoiced.

As Zechariah goes on, he makes it clear that Zion's king is also our king. "His kingdom will extend from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth." Shouldn't we too rejoice that the one who rode into Jerusalem on this day was our king?

It is true that this country was founded as a result of a revolution against a king, and really, against the concept of having a king. Our founding fathers deliberately set up a government of the people, for the people, by the people. Before he became the second president of our country, John Adams, while he was serving as vice president to George Washington, tried to persuade the Senate to have the president referred to as "His Majesty the President," or something similar. But the Senate voted against him that the president's title should simply be "The President of the United States," and so he was consequently addressed simply as "Mr. President." In fact, the fact that Adams even pushed for this led other senators and representatives to begin referring to him as "His Rotundity the Vice President," in reference to his plumpness.

But no matter how averse we may be to having a king as citizens of the United States, we must admit that if we were guaranteed a righteous and upright king, it would be the best system of government. Just think we if had someone above and beyond all the chaos and corruption who could exercise perfect justice without hindrance, cut through all the red tape, and save us from every threat.

And we have the advantage of hindsight, which lets us see that the king who rode into Jerusalem on this day was not there to save the people from the Persians or the Romans. The Hebrew word for "brings salvation" that Zechariah uses comes from the word *yasha*. It's the same word from which the name *Yeshua* or *Jesus* comes. And Matthew tells us why this king was given the name Jesus: "because he will save his people *from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21). Jesus doesn't save us from bad earthly rulers. He didn't come to implement social justice. If that's what he did, we would still die. He saves us from our sins, so that after this life we can enjoy eternal life with him.

"Your king is coming to you. He is righteous and brings salvation" would have indeed caused the Judeans listening to Zechariah's prophecy to rejoice greatly and shout for joy. But the fact that he goes on to say that this king is "humble" and rides on "the foal of a donkey" would have quickly transformed their great joy into puzzled looks.

A king to restore the throne of David in Jerusalem could not be humble and gentle, could not ride on a donkey, much less the foal of a donkey. He would have to be powerful and demanding and ruthless, riding on a rippling, majestic war-steed.

But this is how Zechariah begins to show the Judeans their greatest need and to show them the kind of king they should therefore really wish for and expect.

Again, we have the advantage of hindsight, and we know and love what Zechariah is describing. When a child has broken a window because he was throwing a ball in the house like his father had told him not to countless times, and he sits there crying over his wrongdoing, he does not want his father to come to him powerful and demanding and ruthless, to enact strict justice on him. He wants him to come to him humbly and gently, with forgiveness.

So too, as we examine ourselves according to God's law and see our sinful condition and the many sins that result from that condition, we do not need our King to come to us powerful

and demanding and ruthless, especially not when he is completely righteous himself. We need him to come humbly, with forgiveness.

Yet we also need him actually to be able to forgive, and that is why we also rejoice that he rides not just on a donkey, a humble beast of burden, but on a donkey's colt. I mentioned last year what many of you already know better than I—how riding any colt is something that can only be done over time with a lot of training and patience. But not for Jesus on this day. A colt is brought to him and he sits on it and rides into Jerusalem amid large crowds without incident. And so even in his humility and gentleness, Jesus displays hidden yet matchless power. So when he says he brings salvation, we know he does. When he says he forgives, we know he not only means it, but that his forgiveness actually has value before God in heaven.

Yes, our king comes to us today, King Jesus. And that is reason for us to rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

“I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem. The battle bow will be taken away, and he will proclaim peace to the nations.”

Once again, Zechariah emphasizes for the Judeans who have returned from exile that their coming king is not the king they might expect, but he is the king they need. Some of them might have wanted the exact opposite of the king Zechariah describes here, not one who proclaims peace, but one who declares war—war on the Babylonians, war on the Persians, war on the Romans, war on anyone who tries to control the land God had once given them.

But no, Zechariah says, there will be no more war. But Zechariah is not saying that a war-horse will never again ride through the actual city of Jerusalem once Jesus comes, or that an actual battle bow will never be owned in her walls again. A simple look at the history of Jerusalem and at the Jerusalem of today will dispel that notion.

Zechariah hints at what he's getting at especially with the phrase “I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim.” Ephraim was the tribe located right in the middle of Israel. It was a border tribe between the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel. After Israel was divided into northern and southern kingdoms like this, many of the wars Israel fought were against themselves, north vs. south. The peace this king comes to bring is not peace between the Israelites and other nations, but a peace among the Israelites themselves.

The apostle Paul clears this up: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace” (Colossians 3:15). And the writer to the Hebrews says, “You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, *to the church of the firstborn*, whose names are written in heaven” (12:22–23). Zechariah is talking about the peace that will exist within the Holy Christian Church, a spiritual peace, a peace enjoyed by faith in Jesus, peace with each other because we have peace with God.

There are plenty of Christian denominations and differences between those denominations right now, and it is good and God-pleasing to take note of those differences and to practice church fellowship on the basis of them. We cannot read hearts, so we must judge on the basis of doctrine, on the basis of the teachings of God's clear Word. If we try to establish fellowship and peace where there is no doctrinal agreement, then that is a false peace and worse yet, we are playing God.

But on the other hand, it is a great joy to know that there is an invisible bond that I have with all other true believers in Jesus throughout the world, no matter what denomination they might belong to. There is a peace that exists between us that we enjoy by faith, and that is a peace we should also be seeking to put into practice in a visible way with those who *are* united with us in the same confession.

But notice how Jesus establishes this peace. He simply proclaims it. “He will *proclaim* peace.” *The Office* is not a show that I would recommend that you watch, but I have seen a number of episodes and a few of them are very funny, especially in the earlier seasons. In one of them, the office manager is sharing some of his financial woes with one of the office workers, and the office worker asks him if he has thought about declaring bankruptcy. The office manager, who is quite naïve, proceeds to come out of the break-room later in the episode and he shouts, “I declare BANKRUPTCY!” The office worker immediately pays his manager a visit in his office and says, “I just wanted you to know that you can’t just say the word *bankruptcy* and expect anything to happen.” To which the office manager replies, “I didn’t *say* it; I *declared* it.”

The office manager’s actions are amusing because we recognize how foolish it is to just speak something that’s as significant as that and think that it has happened just because we have said it. But that’s exactly what Jesus does. When Jesus rose from the dead and told his disciples, “Peace be with you,” those words weren’t just said. Jesus actually gave them peace with God and with each other through those words. When I announce to you at the end of most services, “The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace,” those words aren’t just said. Jesus will actually give you peace through those words. That’s why we call his Word the means of grace, because his word actually gives what it promises and proclaims.

The king who rode into Jerusalem on this day, King Jesus, proclaims peace, peace with God, peace with each other, through his forgiveness and salvation. That is reason to rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

“His kingdom will extend from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth.”

Again, how have kings of the earth attempted to rule the earth? Through deception and manipulation, violence and bloodshed. And has even one of them ever succeeded even for a moment? And if they have time to reflect on their falling short of world domination, how do you think they explain it? “If only I had a stronger army! If only I had more money and resources at my disposal! If only I were more powerful and ruthless! If only my subjects were more loyal to me and supported me more!”

Not a one of them thinks, “If only I were more humble! If only I were more peaceful!”

But King Jesus, the one who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey’s colt on this day, the one who exercises gentleness and humility, the one who proclaims peace, is the only one who has ever succeeded where the others have failed. His rule actually extends to the ends of the earth. In nations all around the world there are citizens whose hearts he commands not by force, but by his gospel of forgiveness. In every nation there are citizens who would gladly give up their citizenship, yes, who would gladly give their lives, in order to remain loyal to King Jesus. There is no one individual with a kingdom as extensive as his.

And that’s the kingdom to which you and I belong! We belong to the best kingdom, to the kingdom that supersedes all the others.

Palm Sunday—the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem. It’s a day that gives us reason to rejoice greatly and shout for joy. Our righteous, saving, and humble king comes to us. He proclaims peace—with God and with each other. His kingdom actually stretches to the ends of the earth, yes, up until the end of the earth, when he will perform his final act of salvation and bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom. Amen.