

PRISONERS OF HOPE

Zechariah 9: 9-12

(Augsburg College Chapel, 8 September 2017)

A year ago, as our community gathered for the fall semester, our hearts and minds were troubled by what we were witnessing in a rancorous and mean-spirited election season. Two months later, the election decided – and no matter what side you supported – we were shocked and buffeted by a polarized electorate, a people divided in their experiences and opinions and aspirations. Many of my friends and colleagues lamented that the stress and anxiety of our lives together was debilitating. We recognized the bubbles we occupied and yet we were sore pressed to imagine any constructive way forward. A depressing and daunting place to find ourselves. Not much evidence for optimism.

“Prisoners of the waterless pit,” the prophet Zechariah describes the exiled Israelites. An apt description of our common lives during those difficult days and months.

And then I began to see glimpses of a different story line, a counter narrative that called us back to work. 100 days of engagement here on campus, with faculty, staff and students gathering to reflect, discuss and act as fellow citizens. Folks on campus embracing our immigrant neighbors to show we cared and had their backs. Lots of good people seeking to understand the experiences of others by sharing their stories – even, and especially, if those experiences differed from their own. Students engaging elected officials to make the case for policies and practices that reflected our common aspirations for health and education and justice. And on and on – even into this fall when all first year students learned the beginning skills of democratic engagement and we celebrated our recovery community here at Augsburg and we stood with our Dreamer students to keep our promises to them.

And here too, Zechariah offers a frame for exploring our lives of faith today. For people of faith and all of God’s creation, the prophet challenges us with this powerful message that describes what God intends for God’s people and world. “...Because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.” As with the ancient Israelites, freed from the Babylonian exile, we too are freed from the waterless pit by the God we know as creator, redeemer and spirit among us. But it doesn’t end there.

The next line shows us where this newfound freedom leads. “Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope.” Freed from the abyss, we are sent home – back to our fortresses, our streets, our lives in communities, our campus – now bound not by exile in an alien land, but by the hope that ignites new life as stewards of our places and spaces and homes. Prisoners of hope, sent home.

So – what’s faith got to do with it? Islamic scholar, Omar Safi, who teaches at Duke University, commenting on this passage from Zechariah, suggests a difference between what he calls “cheap optimism” – something he says runs deep in the American consciousness – and the cosmic quality of hope, rooted in faith, while at the same time with our feet mired in suffering. Quoting Desmond Tutu, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.” Safi continues, “For hope to be real, there has to be a prison. And we, in the prison.” Faith makes hope possible in a world defined by hatred, greed, bigotry and darkness.

We have wise guides in our own tradition to how faith calls us as prisoners of hope. Martin Luther writes in *The Freedom of the Christian* that the faithful are perfectly freed through faith alone in Jesus Christ and at the same time perfectly bound so that we might serve the neighbor. Freed from the waterless pit – in exile from our home – so that we might return to our communities as prisoners of hope. Quoting Luther, “From faith there flows a love and joy in the Lord. From love there proceeds a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves the neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss.” In other words, for Luther, our faith itself calls us out of ourselves and into love of the world, where what we know and do are always about serving our neighbor without account of our own standing.

Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor literally a prisoner of the Nazis in the 1940s and executed just before the Allies liberated Germany, wrote these compelling words from prison to his friends, Eberhard and Renate Bethge: “The world lives by the blessing of God and of the righteous and thus has a future. Blessing means laying one’s hand on something and saying, Despite everything, you belong to God. This is what we do with the world that inflicts such suffering on us. We do not abandon it; we do not repudiate, despise or condemn it. Instead we call it back to God, we give it hope, we lay our hand on it and say: May God’s blessing come upon you; be blessed, world created by God, you who belong to your Creator and Redeemer.” Surely these are the words of a prisoner of hope, made so by his deep faith in the redeeming grace of our God who calls us back to our fortresses to be God’s blessing hands in the world.

At the beginning of our academic year, I am always full of hope for the wonder of education, for the hearts and hands and minds that come together in this community of learning and faith so that we might discern what God intends for us and God’s good creation. This fall, I am inspired by Zechariah’s compelling challenge to know ourselves as prisoners of hope, those bound in service to and love of neighbor.

Quoting Omar Safi once again, “Today, we say, Go back to your fortress, O you prisoners of hope. Go back to Ferguson. Go back to Staten Island. Go back to South Carolina. Go back to Chapel Hill. Go back to Syria. Go back to Palestine. (To which we might add, Go back to North Minneapolis and Cedar Riverside and Rondo and Phillips). Let us not

wallow in the valley of despair. Let us climb on ahead to the promised land of justice. This is our hope. For us, the prisoners of hope.”

In Suzanne Robbins', *The Hunger Games*, there is a telling exchange between President Snow, who fears that Katniss Everdeen's victory will foment revolution in far-flung districts, and the game-master Seneca Crane, the one responsible to make the Games serve the needs of the oppressive empire.

President Snow says, “Hope. It is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous. A spark is fine, as long as it is contained.

Seneca Crane asks: “So?” and Snow replies, “So, CONTAIN it.” (Adapted from “A Sermon on Hope,” Timothy Safford, 7/19/15)

Hope unleashed. I await with great anticipation to see how and where the hope you all instill in our community might be made manifest here on campus, in our neighborhood and around the world. My anticipation springs from my faith that our remarkable God calls us back to our fortresses and homes and neighborhoods and institutions so that we might hear the final message of the prophet Zechariah: “...today I declare that I will restore to you double.” The message that we prisoners of hope, now returned from exile, will know God's abundance and love and grace many times over in the lives we lead, in the blessings we offer, in the promises we make, in the world we love.

As always, with our God, the best is yet to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.