

Pentecost 5, 7.5.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm 145:8-14; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

“Rest for the Weary”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. Today Jesus promises rest for the weary, saying, “*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens.*” These words are especially meaningful, because these past months we have each been carrying heavy burdens. These past months have been physically, emotionally, and spiritually draining. Jesus reminds us that when we return to him, we will find a deep inner rest that frees us from our burdens.

In today’s first reading, the prophet Zechariah, using an unusual image, encourages us to be “*prisoners of hope.*” Zechariah reminds us that we are to hope against all of life’s troubles, placing our hope in the king of peace who comes riding on a donkey. This image is, of course, an image of Jesus, the prince of peace. Only in Jesus will we find true peace, the peace that passes all understanding. Only in Christ Jesus will we experience peace that the world can never give, because the world and its kingdoms do not possess this peace.

The prophet Zechariah wrote at a time that was in some ways similar to our own time: Israel had been exiled to Babylon, and had just been allowed to return from exile. However, Israel had returned to uncertainty. Zechariah’s time was a time of the rebuilding and restoration of his community, yet there was also crop failure, shortage of food and supplies, and loss of personal wealth due to economic inflation. It was a time of crisis that led even to a crisis of identity for the nation.

These past months, we have also been in exile. We have been in exile from school, workplaces, community, family, and church. Though we have been allowed to begin to reopen our communities, to begin to come back from exile, as it were, it has not been as easy as we had hoped. Like Zechariah’s day, there have been failures of businesses, shortages of supplies, even loss of personal wealth due to hard economic conditions. Our society, too, is experiencing difficulties with our return from exile. We long for a full return from our “*exile of pandemic,*” and yet it is not easy. We realize daily how much is still out of our control. As much as we want to believe that a return from our “*Babylonian exile of pandemic*” will be easy, it will probably not be easy for a long time.

Zechariah reminds us to become “*prisoners of hope*” who hope in the king of peace who comes

riding on a donkey, the one who “*shall command peace to the nations.*” Today’s psalm reminds us that this king’s kingdom is “*an everlasting kingdom.*” As the psalmist writes, the Lord of this kingdom “*upholds those who are falling and raises up those who are bowed down.*” This everlasting kingdom is always around us, within us, and we always have access to it.

It has been four months since we last worshiped together in this sanctuary. Our last in-person service was March 8th. We have experienced four months of exile from our own temple. Like Israel in Babylonian captivity, we struggle in our own captivity to pandemic, and we also long to return to worship in this sanctuary. We had planned to “re-gather” in what would have been Phase 3 on July 12 next week, but this is no longer possible. We have been asked to wait, wear masks, and continue to care for one another from a distance. This is why St. Mark’s Executive Committee has postponed our worship together. Our own “exile of pandemic” means we need to continue to care for one another in new ways. We want this entire congregation to come through this time of pandemic safe and healthy. So we are proceeding with all due caution because each life is precious.

As Zechariah writes, we are to be “*prisoners of hope.*” In our continued exile, we look to Christ Jesus who says, “*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*” Jesus promises us rest, rescue, and freedom from our captivity and exile.

In today’s readings, Paul also writes of “captivity.” Paul reminds us that we are also “captive” to sin that dwells within us. Paul writes, “*I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*” Part of our ongoing captivity is also about knowing the good we should do, but not being able to actually do it. Paul writes, “*Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” Paul reminds us that we are often our own worst enemy unable to do the good we know we should do.

Like Paul, Jesus’ words also speak about our preoccupied selves. Jesus says, “*But to what will I compare this generation?*” Jesus’ question resounds and reverberates in our own time! What shall we compare our own generation to? How will future generations describe us and our exile and captivity from one another? You see, it has also become apparent that we are not only in exile to a pandemic, but we continue to be in captivity to sin that separates sisters, brothers, blacks, whites, differing ethnic groups - the people of one nation from one another. We are increasingly a nation in captivity. We know the good we should do. We know that all people are sisters and brothers. We know we have all been created in God’s image, and are therefore, one human family. And yet, Paul’s words

are also our words, *“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”* Who will rescue us from our captivity to this body of death - to hatred, racism, and division?

For all of our modernity, for all of our technological progress, as children and heirs of the Enlightenment tradition, we are still unable to the good we know we should do. As Paul writes, *“the evil I do not want is what I do.”* For all of our might as a nation, the words of today’s psalm reverberate about God’s kingdom: *“Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom.”* The implication is, of course, that human power and human kingdoms falter and even fail. We are invited once again to look to the everlasting kingdom that begins and dwells first here - in our hearts.

Substantive change - real change - will never happen until we seek true freedom – freedom in Christ - from our captivity to sin. Only Jesus gives rest for the weary; strength to begin a return from exile; strength to leave captivity to sin and the sinful structures of our world. Only Jesus offers rest for the weary that frees the human heart.

Paul and Jesus remind us that we have some culpability for our continued exile from one another. We did not, of course, ask for this pandemic, but we will need to work together to leave it behind. We did not ask for human division, but as human beings we have not always welcomed one another as Christ has welcomed us. Yet Jesus welcomes us again, saying, *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest...for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”*

As followers of Jesus, we do not need to agree on politics, economics, and social policy, but as followers of Jesus, we are called to be “gentle and humble in heart,” to learn from Jesus, and to become one in Christ. When we are weary with carrying the heavy burdens of life, we are to come to Jesus, who will give us rest, free us to live as one people, and free us to live for others.

Most of us have never been in exile. Only once in my life, prior to this was I told to flee – to briefly become an exiled person. It was 2011 in Japan during the initial worry about the meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear power plant. My wife and I were ordered to leave Tokyo for a place further south and wait. We were ordered to be “socially distant” from Tokyo, from family, friends, work, church – from home. What I learned from that very brief encounter with exile is that God walked with us in exile. This experience taught me again to trust that God is walking with us now and to rely upon God daily. We will get through this, but we need to rely upon Christ Jesus who

offers peace, rest, and freedom. As Jesus walks with us in our exiles from school, the workplace, our communities, and church, we also need to work together as one people, one body, one church. When Jesus says, “*Come to me,*” Jesus is inviting us into prayer and moments of quiet from the noise and division of the world.

Jesus’ question, “*But to what will I compare this generation?*” is not a rhetorical question. Jesus’ question is about how future generations will describe us - our exile of pandemic and our sinful captivity from one another. We need to value our neighbors, our sisters and brothers of all ethnicities, genders, nations of origin, social standing because Jesus’ universal invitation is to all of us. Come to Jesus again; only in him will we find rest for the weary that frees us to live for others as God has created us to live. Only in Jesus will our hearts be freed from exile and captivity, so that we can finally do the good we know we should to do. Amen.