A President in a Pickup?
Zechariah 9:9-12
Pentecost 3 Year A
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Glendale Baptist Church

A lot can happen in 48 years. It seems a small amount of time in the history of a nation, but tides turn, leaders change, priorities shift, and in just a brief time in history, we can find ourselves in strange lands in circumstances we did not choose nor do we desire. In 586 BCE Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians and hauled off as captives of war to a foreign land. There they lamented their plight by asking “how can we sing the songs of our soul – sacred songs of hope and faith – in this strange land that seems devoid of anything holy?” 48 years later, the Persians had conquered mighty Babylon, and the Israelites found themselves under another foreign rule. The king of the Persians was a more tolerant ruler, though, and declared that any of the Jews who wanted to return to Israel could do so.

That seems an easy choice - stay in a country where you’d been brought against your will or return to your homeland. Except that your homeland is in ruins. There's nothing left but rubble. Do you face a future in a foreign land, but under decidedly better circumstances and possibilities or do you return to the unknown of a ransacked homeland where centers of trade and community had been destroyed and the most holy space you know is in shambles? Economically, it would have been easier to stay in Babylon under a kinder, gentler king than to return to the chaos of holy Jerusalem. But what happens in the next 48 years? What will the next ruler do?
If ever the voice of the Holy is needed, this seems like the time. As is often the case, the voice of the Holy comes, but not necessarily with the message we might hope for.

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
See, your king comes to you, ...riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Can you hear the people? “Rejoice? Really? Because there’s some guy on a baby donkey? Do you know what we’ve been through? We need a strong leader, not some charismatic guy trying to win us over through empty symbols. We need someone with a sword in one hand to protect us and hammer in the other to help us rebuild our lives. And one who will demand retribution and reparation.”

“Yes, a king on a donkey,” says the prophet. A leader who can look beyond the want of retaliation -- and what passes for “it’s only fair.” Someone who chooses a donkey not as a symbol of how humble they are but chooses it with deeper intent...a people still reeling from the aftermath of war don’t need to be reminded of the business of death by having their leader dash in on a magnificent war horse, no matter how that would stir their emotions – momentarily. No – this is a leader who chooses a baby donkey because it is a reminder of the business of life – a baby donkey that will help sustain a family for many years, providing transportation and a means of growing food. Your leader, says the prophet, will trade a stallion for a donkey, a tank for a pickup truck.

There’s an image we don’t get to see very often. A king on a donkey? A president in a pickup? Leaders who don’t arrogantly claim the privileges of their station? Leaders who don’t exploit
the symbols of warfare or wealth, but rather choose symbols that locate them among all people and convey their wisdom into what is sustaining to life?

Dan Clendenin remarks that the prophet's king on a donkey is emblematic, not oxymoronic.

"The hope that Zechariah offered the Jews envisioned a future far different than the one they might have understandably sought given their humiliating circumstances, and certainly compared to the canons of conventional political wisdom. The future his political poetry envisioned is characterized by national humility not hubris. The future kingdom is peaceable not provocational." ¹

When times were bleak, when the people's hearts were broken and their spirits sagging, the prophets' words drew hope for the present from visions of the future. They looked beyond the moment of what is to give the people a future to live into - a vision of what can be. Sometimes it seemed absurd. It often did not meet the immediate want for revenge or satisfaction. It required that they find hope outside of the things that would be easy or expected. But the visions the prophets drew for a new future were such powerful ones that hope was instilled yet again. Sometimes the people turned away from what would have felt best in the moment in order to move toward what will be most life-giving for generations to come. They saw a life for their children in that future, and for their children's children. On their good days.

Have we lost that ability? Who are the prophets of our time?

Each year 2nd year Divinity School students at Vanderbilt do a required Field Education class. We’ve certainly benefited over the years from the placement portion of that requirement, having interns who have ministered with us and who still do. The other part of that class is a 2-hour a week seminar which usually meets in small groups with a facilitator to discuss the work the students are doing in their placements. Several times each semester, the entire class meets together, though. And one of those class meetings is centered on prophetic ministry, raising the question “What does it mean to be a prophetic presence in our day and time?” Almost always that conversation goes to the great prophetic voices of Dr King and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

I’ve noticed as I’ve listened to the discussions of that particular class that prophetic is usually equated with social justice. That’s understandable. Amos said “Why would God want your worship, your religious ceremonies when you’d sell a person for a pair of sandals?” And that is certainly part of the work of the prophets. The real work of a prophet is to remind the people who they are, to whom they belong. It is to say “You are people named Beloved by the Holy One. Remember that. Act like you believe it!” The real work of the prophet is to call us to remember that our home is in the presence of the Holy and that the spirit of the Holy is within us.

Who in our day is doing that? Who is reminding us of who we are? Who among our leaders is calling us back to the presence of the Holy?
Instead of “Mission Accomplished” what if our leaders walked into our midst, with the message “It is finished.”

In ASL you express “finish” like this. Done away with. Cast out. It can be a casual “over” “done” or it can be an emphatic “No More!”

What if our leaders proclaimed “War? It is finished.” “Violence? It is finished.” Oppression here is finished.

Instead of slinging insults and falsehoods at each other, what if our leaders said “It is finished”? No more will we let differences of opinion and belief divide us and create uncivilized creatures of us. No longer will we let money drive our votes. No longer will we govern merely to get re-elected. That is finished. We will govern with the welfare of all people at the heart of every vote. Respect will prevail in our interactions and our disagreements. We will discuss and disagree not so we can make the other look bad but so that all of our decisions are made with the broadest possible consideration of their impact, importance, and value.

But the prophets have not come from among the political leaders. They have come from the fringes - from the courageous ones on the edges who can see big pictures and ask big questions and pull us out of a comfortable and familiar myopia into a panoramic vision of what the future of God's Creation might be.

“Hope, says, Joan Chittister, “is not a matter of waiting for things outside us to get better. It is about getting better inside. It is about allowing ourselves to believe in a future we cannot see....”
Hope - We hear a lot of talk about it any time we have an election in our country. It gets to be a sound bite and a slogan and we engage in that process with hope that the next guy (can we even envision it not being a guy?!) will be the ONE. Then, the next guy is elected and we continue down the same road - some things change, but our divisions continue to define us.

Our hope continues to lie in something outside of us changing. We want someone else to act better or change a law or re-create a system that matches what we believe will make things better. And usually what we want is based in an individualism that has lost its ability to cooperate and collaborate. I’d much rather there be outcry in our country that we have abandoned “one nation, indivisible” in the pledge of allegiance to the US flag than the bickering we have over the phrase “under God.” I’d rather see an outrage about how we have let differences in belief and opinion tear us apart instead of being among the best assets we have.

We are Baptists - we should be leading that outcry. Our forebears held firmly that no decision should be made without carefully considering dissenting voices. They were persecuted and killed because they dared raise the dissenting voices when state and church got in bed together and when the rights of citizens were trampled in maneuvers for power. It’s no wonder we have a reputation for being a contentious bunch. Actually, it’s a reputation well-deserved. When we are at our contentious best, we are raising the voices of dissent whenever the beloved creation of God is being taken for granted and when people are valued less than power or wealth. When we are at our contentious worst, however, we’re forsaking our birthright by giving in to the distractions by inconsequential arguments and being negligent of love for our neighbor, no matter what bumper stickers she has on
her car. We have inherited a freedom of religion and we allow it to be squandered by the voices of fear that scream for conformity.

It’s hard to keep our eyes the prophet’s vision of hope when the strong foundation under our feet seems compromised. Is our reality the vision that our forebears saw? Or could they see even beyond us?

A king on a donkey - a president in a pickup - a prophet’s vision born in a heart and lived into the future for the good of all. The prophet’s vision does not stop with this royal presence rejecting pretense and bearing hope. It is a vision that goes on past any political or national boundaries that we can imagine. Individual armor shed and weapons left to become farm tools, the vision goes further -- all the enemy's military hardware, the tools of war and implements of conquest will be removed from the land — no more war-horses in the streets of Jerusalem, no more battle bows in the hands of the enemy. Peace will reign in Jerusalem. Ah, there is the vision that compels and beckons us to set our faces toward it and live into it.

And peace will reign in all nations -- from sea to sea. Peace to "the ends of the earth."

Isn’t that a vision to have before us? Claims of divine favoritism fade into oblivion. The need to be right at all costs gives way to the need to be connected in love. Not only have weapons been removed, they don’t make sense to us any more.

Tomorrow as we celebrate the birth of our nation, let us remember that we have inherited a precious thing - a dream that that liberty and justice are for all people - a dream that the voice
of every person is heard and heeded; that freedom is won not by violent revolt but by the perseverance of people committed to it with their lives. It's not a perfect dream. We have not created a nation that lives up to it in its fullest. But it is a good dream, one full of possibility that carries us to a better future.

A French philosopher and journalist who traveled extensively in the US noted his impressions of how US Americans portrayed the divine: "a God without mystery; a good-guy God; almost a human being, a good American" (Bernard-Henri Lévy, *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*, 2006).

Lest we create God in such a limited and self-serving nationalist image, let us remember that not only have we inherited a dream, we have been entrusted with a prophet's vision. It is a far better dream for it engulfs the world in a hope that exceeds anything we can imagine creating. It takes the best of what we can dream and convinces us that we can live even beyond that. It is a vision of the redemption of all that has gone wrong and of the truth that can prevail. When the prophet points out the leader on the baby donkey, don't join the parade – unless, of course, you are willing to be a prisoner of hope – one bound only by the limitless imagination of love.