**Pentecost 6 (Year A)**

**9 July 2023**

**Pastor Julia Seymour**

**Big Timber Lutheran Church**

God’s grace and peace to you, friends in Christ, from me and from my fellow workers in the Lord in Big Timber. We continue in prayer for you and for the blessings of the Spirit’s presence to be made manifest within and among you in clear and tangible ways.

Friends, I know we are prisoners in hope- exactly what God calls God’s people through the words of the prophet Zechariah. We are prisoners of hope - bound by our trust in our Creator, our faith in the Savior, and our awe in the ongoing work of the Spirit. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, our hope in eternal mercy, everlasting grace, and a forever peace is the magnet that draws us forward, keeping us putting one foot in front of the other.

What does it mean to be a prisoner of hope?

In Zechariah’s time, the people of God have been returned from exile in Babylon. The return didn’t happen the way they expected, with someone from their own ranks, like King David, coming and thwarting the work of the Babylonian empire.

Instead, just as the Babylonians had proved to be the conquerors of Judea, so the Persians came in and were the conquerors of Babylon. Cyrus of Persia released God’s people from their exile and sent them back to Jerusalem, establishing both Persian management of the area and good relations with the people.

Positive relations between the empire and the local context notwithstanding, God’s chosen people were both joyful and confused by the situation. They were able, through Cyrus’ generosity, to begin to rebuild the city and the Temple, both having been destroyed by Babylonians. The construction of a second Temple meant the ability to resume liturgical religious life- songs, sacrifices, prayers, and ceremonies. Yet, the people had always assumed a savior would be from God. Could God work through a Persian king? The return and the restoration seemed in line with what the people knew of the character of God, but the source was unexpected.

When God speaks, then, through Zechariah, God calls the people: “prisoners of hope”. What they want is already happening, but its completion, its very fullness, is not yet. Within God’s work, there is always more to come. The Divine overflows with promise, possibility, and potential. Amid things we cannot understand- whether we are the people to whom Zechariah speak or God’s people today- amid things we cannot understand, God is at work. Through unexpected leaders, through release from captivity, through the long arc of justice for all, God is at work. We who trust in God’s promises are prisoners of that hope, praying to come to a deeper understanding in our lifetimes.

St. Augustine said, “Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, do not seek to understand so that you may believe, but believe so that you may understand.” (Repeat slowly.)

We often assume that if we understand enough about God, about the Bible, about church history, about the Spirit, about Jesus, about being Lutheran, about the mysteries of faith- if we understand or know enough, then everything will be easier, and we will be more faithful. Surely great understanding leads to great faithfulness.

This is exactly the thing about which both Paul and Augustine are warning us. Most of us understand the 10 commandments and, yet, we still break them. We pretty much understand the concept of loving our neighbor as ourselves, but we’re not always good at putting it into practice. We understand the injunction to “love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and all our strength”, but we too often find ourselves with other priorities. Like Paul, we understand the right things to do, but frequently we cannot will ourselves to do them and we often do the exact opposite of what we know is right.

Thus, we are prisoners in the hope of doing better. Not doing better for the sake of our relationship with God in Christ, but doing better because of our relationship with God in Christ. Our salvation is already completed and assured. Our actions, our works if you will, have nothing to do with achieving a place in heaven, but pour out from the joy of knowing that there is already a room with our name on it, built by Jesus Christ.

The hope to which we are bound, then, is connected to what we pray using Jesus’ words. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We know that God can and does bring about the Divine Will without our help or interference, but it is the blessing of our lives to be included in that work of restoration, reformation, and renewal. Thus, we are prisoners of that hope- to live into the joy of our salvation, turning away from what we know we should not do, and being led by the Spirit to participate in the working out of the kingdom on earth as in heaven. By believing in this reality, we shall in time see our understanding increased.

We who have followed Christ for some time understand the pressures of being a prisoner of hope. In fact, we understand it so well that we are tempted to scoff at the idea of Christ’s yoke being easy and his burden light. Is carrying a message of justice, inclusion, and peace in a divided world easy? Is the call to love our enemies, to be open to receiving care from others, and the pressure to resist the idols of empire a light burden?

It is in the gospel reading that we more easily understand the prison portion of being a prisoner of hope. We have hope, but we find ourselves in our regular pews, at our regular time, on our regular day, with mostly the same people over and over. This repetition may indeed come from hope, but more and more it comes from a prison of tradition, habit, and fear. (What fear, you might ask. Fear of hell and being separated from God, though that fear is unnecessary for God’s perfect love for us has cast it out.)

This rote habit of religion will never be enough, and it is, sadly, why we often see people leaving the church. They understood the repetition, but not the hope. The poet Emily Dickinson writes of hope as a “thing with feathers, that perches in the soul.” In her conception, hope is like a songbird. For Montanans, our hope is not a songbird. It is a raptor- a bald eagle, a great horned owl, an osprey, a red-tailed hawk.

Our hope comes screeching in and surprises us with its ferocity. Our hope is present over the carcasses of what we thought we knew, picking out nourishment and strength for life. Our hope soars high and dives low, knowing the lay of the land and showing us how the wind blows.

We are not bound to timid anticipation but to fierce craving for the fulfillment of all that God has promised and a deep desire to participate in that same fulfillment. Christ’s burden is light when we accept the yoke of his hope and faithfulness and pull in the same direction as true disciples and imitators of him.

With this image, we can more fully understand that we are not prisoners in a small cell with little freedom. Instead, as prisoners of hope, we are chained by our baptisms to Christ. Where he goes, we must follow. Where we go, he will be. And all the liberation we need, all the liberation we seek, all the liberation we can understand will come with following Christ’s commands.

God’s eye, as the song says, is indeed on the sparrow. And the osprey. And on each of us. All we need of, God has provided. There is plenty of mercy, grace, healing, possibility, and love for all God’s beloved children. This is most certainly true and it is our hope in this truth that holds us fast.

Glory be to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.