

CHRISTIANS TRULY FOLLOW CHRIST IN THE WAY TO ETERNAL LIFE

Hear again the Word of the Lord:

In (the) blood of My covenant with you I will set free your captives from (the) pit without waters.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Today, our sacrifice of prayer to the Lord for all His benefits to us included, in part in the opening Collect prayer, a petition that *we... may... follow [Jesus] in the way that leads to eternal life*. Those words were offered outside the building while there were plenty of distractions about us. Even so, did you (as I believe the fellows at yesterday's Men's Bible study did) think about what we were asking for with our prayer?

What does it mean to *follow Him in the way that leads to eternal life*? First, it means that we are to ever look to Him in this life as the Way to eternal life. Second, it means that we are to remember that during the times we bear crosses in this life, those trials and tribulations that come to us on account of the good confession of the Faith, we are actually picking up our crosses and following Him. Third, it means that you may reflect concerning how that fits in with the New Covenant theme of this day.

As the crowds heralded Jesus with cries for salvation, for God's blessings upon Him, and for God's salvation to reach into the highest realms of the heavens, they were actually declaring that God was fulfilling Scripture in their midst. We pray that the majority's expectations concerning King Jesus that day long ago were quite different from your expectations this day as you entered into His Presence. Based on the Scriptures' witness, we may understand that the Israelites who heralded Jesus as King as He humbly rode into Jerusalem were anticipating that His kingship would be established very differently than it actually was. Yet, both they and you heard the same Scripture that promised the Christ's triumphal entrance. You have heard of, learned

¹ Zechariah 9:11.

about, and received the Holy Spirit. He leads you into different expectations for Jesus than they had long ago as you hear words like these:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, cause to shout, O Israel, behold your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, bowed down and riding upon (a) she-ass and upon (a) colt, (the) son of (a) she-ass.²

By the time Jesus brought the Real Presence of God, Himself, back into the earthly Holy City, God's people would have had heard those words repeated in Temple Services, first of all; then in synagogues in time; and throughout about five centuries in their homes. When the faithful had first heard Zechariah's prophecy, a remnant, Israelites, descendants of those who had been deported from Israel and Judah had been allowed to return to their homeland. Their ancestors and they had lived in exile for decades apart from Jerusalem on account of the conquests of the armies of Assyria, Babylon and Persia. God had allowed those deportations on account of His people's unrepentant sins against Him, and His Word.

When God had given Zechariah the Word of today's prophecy, faithful exiles from Israel and Judah had been hoping to receive God's gifts from the rebuilt Jerusalem altar for around 16 years. Consider that in light of our waiting for the beautiful new stone Altar that is to be completed outside this building. We have been anticipating its consecration for just a few weeks. We thought it might be ready today. We pray that we can dedicate it at the Sunrise Service in eight days, God-willing.

It may also be helpful for us to keep one of today's themes, faithful waiting, in mind as we move through the process that should lead to the building of God's new Church on this site in a few years. Unlike the Israelites of Zechariah's time, we have not been exiled from this hill. We have not been driven away from this Altar on account of our unrepentant sins.

² Zechariah 9:9.

That table has stood here through good times as well as through arson, and pandemic. Not a week passed that did not have God ruling in us through His gifts that have flowed from this place. For God's people, that has not always been so.

As today's call to rejoicing first went forth from the mouth of Zechariah, returned Israelite exiles had just finished rebuilding the Lord's Temple. Yet, neither they, nor any of their rightly guided prophets, had witnessed the Divine Presence of the Lord return to dwell in the Temple. God had not yet established again His veiled Presence among them.

You may recall that the glory of the Lord had been witnessed by a prophet to have departed the Temple. It had gone East from that Holy Mountain, finally coming to rest on the mountain opposite the Temple mount, that is, the Mount of Olives.³

When was the Real Presence of the Lord truly witnessed to have returned to the Temple from the Mount of Olives?

It was beheld in Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. You will recall that He began His entrance into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. Today's record frees you to behold, in Jesus' meek and humble procession through the gates of the Holy City, and eventually into the Temple Precincts, that the Real Presence of the Lord returned visibly from where He had departed when God had removed His favor from His people on account of their unrepentant sins. With those biblical realities fresh in your ears, hearts, and minds, hear again the Word:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, cause to shout, O Israel, behold your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, bowed down and riding upon (a) she-ass and upon (a) colt, (the) son of (a) she-ass.⁴

Those words of the prophet to a people long waiting to receive God's gifts of forgiveness from the Jerusalem Altar contained God's promise to restore His Presence

³ cf. Ezekiel 11:23.

⁴ Zechariah 9:9b.

among them. That King God had promised to the people who had borne His Name yet had had no king for themselves. Little did Zechariah's first hearers know that they would have to wait about 550 years for their promised King to arrive. That Promise came in time to people who would have waited, in faithful trust in God's promises, until King Jesus was heralded on the day we call, Palm Sunday.

Throughout those centuries, the Israelites' kingly, messianic, expectations rose. It appears that each leader whom God raised up for them had been anticipated to be the promised king. Several of them had been great military leaders (you can read about them in the second-canon texts of Maccabees). Some of them had been of the priestly line (that fact some of us learned through our Ezra-Nehemiah class in the weeks leading up to Lent). Yet, none of those leaders had been the One!

Waiting in the Faith, with trust in God's promises, is the lot of the faithful in most generations. Today's texts are given to provide comfort to you who are waiting for God to fulfill His promises for you. He will give them to you, in His time, according to His ways. He has promised to give you all that you need, when you need it. As He does so, He teaches patience and gives you trust through His Word.

One of the biblical treasures we are given to behold today is that, while you wait for God to fulfill His promises to you, He neither leaves you nor forsakes you. He continues bringing us through a time of tribulation for all people, and especially for those who desire to be faithful in receiving His gifts. Throughout that time, His grace and mercy have been here for you.

The biblical record, as well as the records of history, stand to remind you that the same God who brought His promised King to those who needed saving long ago, that same God is here for you. God even gave His people images to look for, as He fulfilled His promise to bring the King of Peace to them long ago, and to you today. Remember, Zechariah had declared:

*behold your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, bowed down and riding upon (a) she-ass and upon (a) colt, (the) son of (a) she-ass.*⁵

How does he describe the promised King? He is righteous. That means that He would be completely right with God in Himself. That means that He would be without sin.

Further, He would have salvation in Himself. That is, He would not only be heralded by cries to God to bless Him, but that He would bring blessing with Him. Salvation would be His nature (as well, as we know, declared through and in His Name). How was that King to appear before His people?

Our text promises that he would be humble, or meek. That really means, “bowed down.” He would enter among His people as the Man who was weighed down with the troubles of the world. He would be the Man of Sorrows.⁶ He would be stricken, smitten, and afflicted on behalf of His people.⁷ Through such descriptions you are being called into listening for the King who fulfills them in the readings, sermons, and hymns that come into our ears during Holy Week.

Today, we recall that the King of those who bear God’s Name would enter the midst of His people on the colt of a female donkey. That would reflect the biblical images of processional mounts of the rulers, prophets, and judges of Israel, that is, until King Solomon’s time. Yet, His bowed down entrance would not reflect the manner in which the Kings and rulers of God’s people would have held their triumphal processions in the ten centuries after Solomon. They would have ridden war horses. What kind of King of Salvation and Peace was Zechariah promising?

What image of King did the people behold in Jesus on that first Palm Sunday! They would have beheld the Man they were blessing and heralding as their King to

⁵ *Zechariah 9:9.*

⁶ *C.f. Isaiah 53:13.*

⁷ *c.f. Kelly, Thomas. 1769-1855. Lutheran Service Book, “Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted,” St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 451.*

have a smaller stature in the eyes of man than His mighty conquering forerunners. He would not appear to be a conquering warlord. Hear the Word again, as Zechariah's ancient prophecy declares that which Jesus fulfilled in time:

Then He will cause to cut off (the) chariot from Ephraim; and (the) horse from Jerusalem; and (the) battle-bow will be cut off; and (the) word of peace (will be) for (the) Gentiles; and His domain (will be) from waters unto (the) Sea, and from the River unto (the) ends of the earth.⁸

In that passage, God promises that the bowed-down King would bring the Word of peace for all peoples. His promised Savior King would remove all implements of war from the tribes who bore God's Name. In the text, "Ephraim," refers to the 10 northern tribes deported from Israel in 722 B.C. "Jerusalem," represents the two tribes deported from Judah in 586 B.C. To all Israel, then, those of the Faith, would be united under the King of Salvation. For them, you, there is peace.

In addition, the humble King would bring peace for all peoples all around the world. Today's prophecy, and the texts for the rest of this week, indicate that His Kingdom is a peaceful spiritual one, and not a warlike worldly one. It is a kingdom, one in which we participate today, in which God rules by grace, through faith, with the means He has chosen. Zechariah reminds us of that with words like these:

Also, for you, in (the) blood of My covenant with you, I will set free your captives from (the) pit without waters.⁹

You will recall that the blood of God's covenant was sprinkled upon God's people when He cut that covenant with them during the Exodus. They received visual and enduring reminders of God's covenant on their clothing. (Remember that they did not have *Shout* like we have in the Sacristy in order to remove such stains).

With that imagery, through his words, Zechariah was declaring that His promised King would save through a new blood-covenant. We of this New Covenant

⁸ Zechariah 9:10.

⁹ Zechariah 9:11.

era know and believe that would be sealed in and through the Blood of the King Who was weighed down with the whole world's sin.

It would be His blood that would rescue God's people from the *waterless pit*. That is to bring to mind the places where captives were kept in the Old Testament era. It reminds us of the depths to which those who have rejected God's grace are cast. It speaks of a place without water, that is, without the source of life both in time and in eternity. Hear again God's Word of Promise for you:

For you, in (the) blood of My covenant with you, I will set free your captives from (the) pit without waters.¹⁰

This day, God has gathered us before His Altar Table from which He has never banned us. Here, and we pray, next Sunday early in the morning outside as well as inside, God will continue to pour forth the Blood of His New Covenant. He Who has established His Presence among us through His proclaimed and visible Word, continues to rescue us, you, from the lifeless, waterless depths to which sin, unrepented and unforgiven, would bind you. Here, you receive the Blood that saves you from the desert of unrepentant sin; the wasteland of the hell's separation from the Real Presence of God; and the emptiness of a death without God. God's Way of Salvation, the Way to Eternal life is here in His gifts that flow from His Table.

Following the day when Jesus entered the Temple that first Palm Sunday, He instituted the New Covenant in His blood. After He died on the cross, he split the veil and entered into the Most Holy Place. There He poured out His sin-covering blood. From that time forth, He continues to pour out His life-blood that you might receive all its benefits! Hear in these words God's call to ever return you to His table:

Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope, also today I am causing to declare: double I will restore to you!¹¹

¹⁰ Zechariah 9:11.

¹¹ Zechariah 9:12.

Today, you have returned to the stronghold of the Lord. Today, again, you will receive double for all the crosses you have, or will, bear. Today, you are reminded you are free to follow Christ in the way to eternal life – through Word hymn and Sacrament!

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Lent VI, Palmarum (*LSB* One-Year Series)

John 12:1-9; Psalm 118:19-29; Zechariah 9:9-12; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 21:1-9

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