Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Zech.9:9-12 Ps.145 Matt. 11:16-19, 25-30

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church July 5, 2020

Every once in a while a portion of Scripture appointed for a Sunday morning will stop me in my tracks and refuse to let me go; which is what happened this week as I read in the 12th verse of chapter 9 in the prophetic book of Zechariah, "Return to your stronghold, O **prisoners of hope;** today I declare to you that I will restore to you double… Return to your stronghold, O **prisoners of hope…"**

Never mind that restoration of any kind was nowhere to be seen for the People of Israel, even as the prophet uttered those words, so despairing were they at the state of things in Judah and Jerusalem after their return home from Babylonian exile in the last decades of the 6th century BCE… After years of being **prisoners** in a foreign land, they had expected homecoming to be glorious; a true restoration of the glory days of the Davidic dynasty, in which Jerusalem stood as a light on a hill and Israel as a beacon of justice and peace for all the world to see…

But homecoming had turned out to be anything but glorious… Those who returned from Babylonian exile coming back only to find their temple destroyed, their community devastated, their dream for the glory days of the Davidic dynasty dashed to pieces…

And yet, the prophetic word called upon them to "rejoice greatly," to "shout out loud."…

Holding up the vision of the end times in which their king would come to bring peace and justice to the world, Zechariah had a new **name** for his people, even as they were caught in the throes of despair and discouragement… Reminding them of the covenant of accompaniment and presence God had made with them of old; a covenant that carried with it the promise of a kingdom come, replete with justice and peace, the prophet called his dis-spirited people, "**Prisoners of hope**… Prisoners of **hope**."

The audacity of such a thing reminding me of those words in 1st Peter written to an early Christian community equally dis-spirited… a community undergoing no small degree of persecution, marginalization and injustice… Those words from 1st Peter spoken to a people who could sense no sign whatsoever of the triumphant Christ whose second coming they had been anticipating… those words calling on them, despite everything, "to be ready always to give a defense for the **hope** that was within them."…..

Both Zechariah and 1st Peter suggesting to the people of God in their own day that despite all the uncertainty and fear and injustice and devastation in which they found themselves, there was **hope** to be had in the midst of it all…

Causing me to wonder what manner of hope that might be… And from where such hope might come when everything seems like it's falling apart, and it's very apparent that the center cannot hold…

If our faith story asks us always to be ready to give a defense for the **hope** that is within us… If our faith story names us "**prisoners of hope**," then in this day, our day, right now, **it would be very good to know what our faith story has to say about what exactly we have to base that hope upon…**

It's a good question for this morning…

as the Coronavirus rages around us,

as those long marginalized and victimized in our country are challenging the very systems and institutions upon which many of us have built our lives,

as the fragile fabric that has held families and communities together over the years, is shredding before our eyes…

this question of just where our faith story would say our hope lies is an important question, it seems to me… And while I wanted to find some image, some story for this morning of a **great light shining in the darkness,** some **triumphant sign of life in the midst of death** to illustrate where our hope as Christians lives and moves and has its being, no such image of glory or triumph seemed to be authentic or true or helpful or real in the face of the challenges of these days…

And so instead I decided to bring a poem… a poem I kept coming back to all week… a poem called "Somewhere"….

Somewhere

Somewhere someone is stopping to fix the flat-tire

of a perfect stranger pulled over on a highway

out in the middle of nowhere.

Somewhere someone is sharing their food.

Somewhere someone is playing the piano
in a fifth-floor walk-up. The window is open,
and the music finds its way to an old woman
on the sidewalk below.
She stops, her hatted head tilted up into the falling snow,
listening.

Somewhere a new mother, her breasts full,
is nursing a man hiding from the authorities.
This may shock you. You may think it indecent.
But I read once about how, in the middle of a war in winter
(somewhere in Estonia or Latvia or some other place
where Gypsies once played their fiddles long into the night),
there was a young soldier from one side of the conflict
hiding in a barn. He was starving.
And on that farm was a young woman
with barely enough food to keep herself alive.
When she found the soldier in her barn,
curled up in the hay, nearly frozen,
she let him drink from her.

Somewhere someone is singing a lullaby in the dark.

Somewhere someone is removing a splinter
from a child's hand while telling a story about
dragons and knights and hidden castles in the forest.
In the end a brave knight gently removes the splinter,

which turns out to be a dragon in disguise,
and all is well.

Somewhere someone is unlocking a prison door
and gesturing toward the smell of the sea.

Somewhere someone is waiting in a small boat
under the cover of night.

Somewhere a man is closing the eyes
of the woman he has loved for seventy years,
the last five of which she lay in their wedding bed
unable to speak. When people ask him how he
tended to her with such love for so long,
he looks at them like he doesn't understand
the question.

Somewhere children are playing tag
in a house yard on a summer evening.
The first stars are just now appearing.
And a crescent moon.

Somewhere someone is writing a poem
about all the beauty we cannot see.
If it's you,
I'd love to read it when you're done.

Cleary this poem doesn't offer much by way of hope if you're looking for triumph or glory or some clear measure of success… Matter of fact, some of the small stories it tells speak of moments in time when gestures were made on behalf of love or caring or creativity or relationship that have nothing noteworthy about them; nothing that matters for anything on the world stage… Some of those gestures seemingly inconsequential, not worth mentioning, indecent even… All of them being part of the beauty we do not normally see or celebrate…

But what I want to say this morning is that the poem tries to speak of the kind of hope that lives at the heart of our faith, **because it speaks of a presence that rises in the dark, at the margins, out on a highway in the middle of nowhere…** a presence that rises in city streets and war zones and prisons cells… at death beds and in all those places where, for the sake of a child's sense of his beloved-ness, a story about a dragon and a knight is spun as a splinter is removed from that child's hand… A presence called love that lives and moves and rises whenever love is shared and mercy is extended and justice is done…

(As it is rising now in obscure little no-count neighborhoods across our country as people of every color are showing up to walk with African Americans who have been too frightened to walk in their neighborhoods for years for fear they may not come back home alive…. If you want to read the story about the love rising in this way in the darkness of pervasive fear and racial injustice, read the story of Shawn Dromgoole and his neighborhood on the outskirts of Nashville, Tennessee).

All of these being stories that offer the kind of hope that lives at the heart of our faith… the kind of hope the Empires and the Wall Streets and the Ad Agencies and the War Colleges of the world don't understand… the kind of hope Matthew's Jesus is holding up in our Gospel text for this morning as he speaks of the things that are hidden from the wise and the intelligent but revealed to infants…

The kind of hope consistent with the image of the king Zechariah held up for his people in their time of travail; that king coming into the presence of his people riding on a donkey… As if to say, "Look, hope is not to be found in a king riding a war horse, enticing his subjects with well-made plans for amassing wealth and getting ahead and building a wall to protect it all…

"But rather it is to be found in the king who, for the sake of love, becomes one of us, even unto failure, and shame, and death; that accompanying, suffering love releasing into the world the possibility that despite all evidence to the contrary, something else is on the move… something whose dream is peace, whose way is justice, and whose name is love…"

As Christians of course, we take that image from Zechariah of a humble king riding on a donkey, and we say, "So too the full presence of God, made incarnate in the person of Jesus, is such a king… promising Love's saving presence all the way to the most God-forsaken place imaginable +, where, in love's willingness to accompany the beloved into the howling vortex of death, Love's wild and windy **presence** is released into the world forever more…

Evermore to be glimpsed and known not in spectacles of glory or in halls of power, but at the margins, in the places where, even as the center cannot hold, gestures of caring are extended, and food is shared, and music sounds from a fifth floor walk-up, lifting the hatted head of an old woman standing in the snow…

Hope glimpsed and known as prisons are opened, and boats are waiting under the cover of night, and dying soldiers are nursed, and beloved eyes are gently closed, and laws are questioned, and knees are taken, and libraries in small towns at the edge of the sea write statements about honoring the dignity of all human beings, and small congregations in small towns at the edge of the sea have conversations about how to reach out to their neighbors with whom they do not see eye-to-eye…"

None of these gestures measurable in the way the world so loves to measure things… None of them "worthy" of a Hollywood movie… None of them guaranteeing "success" or "attention" or even the definition of "admirable"… None of them the stuff of Empires or halls of power… but all of them, every single gesture on behalf of justice and beauty and care and compassion offering something in which we can find hope…

Because they all speaks of the love that moves in the dark… of the love that holds when the center **cannot**… of the love that is stronger than death…

…the love whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light… **not because** the seeing and being of such love in this world is easy… **not because** challenging the very systems upon which our privileged lives are built is easy… **not because** reaching out to our neighbor with whom we do not see eye-to-eye is easy… **but because** in the seeing and being to which this Love invites us, we're not called to be successful, we're only called to be faithful…

Faithful to the One whose story assures us again and again that we are freed by love for the sake of love…Freed by love from the fear of falling short in the eyes of God… freed by love from the hamster wheel of success-making and power-positioning and wealth-amassing and possession-protecting… freed by love from cynicism and resignation… freed from it all to become **prisoners of hope…**

Where, in the devastation and despair of every time and every place, we dare to see and to be a sign of love rising in the dark… and where we begin to learn how we too might be able to give a defense for the hope that is within us…. Even when there is no evidence what-so-ever of God's kingdom come in all its glory, on earth as it is in heaven…

Even then we can learn how to give a defense for the hope that is within us, because…

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Somewhere someone is singing a lullaby in the dark.

Somewhere someone is reaching out to their neighbor with whom they do not see eye-to-eye.

Somewhere someone is showing up to walk with someone else who for years has been too frightened to take a walk in their own neighborhood…

And somewhere someone is writing a poem

about all the beauty we cannot see.

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