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Sermon

Prisoners of Hope

Mark 11v1-11

Zechariah 9v9-12

29 March 2015

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Prophecy and its fulfillment are a huge part of the Biblical record. It can be misunderstood by some, who say Jesus manipulated events to fulfill prophecy or that the prophets wrote about events after they happened. That thought wipes out any possibility that we have a God who deals in supernatural knowledge and wisdom. However, it is particularly hard to manipulate the timing and location of one's birth, so I think we can discount the accusation that Jesus manipulated his fulfillment of over 300 prophecies! If we discount prophecy, we shrink God to being like a human being.

This is absolutely not what God is like. We are like him in some ways, but he is not like us. He is all-knowing, all-wise and completely truthful. He is also much, much bigger than we can comprehend. His thoughts are so much wiser than ours.

It must have been hard as the disciples followed Jesus, trying to figure out why he did what he did. Imagine Peter saying, "Oh Jesus! Don't antagonize the Pharisees like that! Couldn't you have healed the man after the sun had gone down and it wasn't the Sabbath any longer? Or - Come on! Let's organize ourselves - There are plenty of good men who are following you. We could rouse them up to fight against the Romans. And with your healing powers plus raising the dead, we will have a renewable, invincible army!... No?" No, his ways are not our ways.

Imagine the road up to Jerusalem. It was a hot and sweaty walk with dust swirling about his feet. Jesus walked a long way with his disciples to get there. He knew what was going to happen in Jerusalem. But he was determined to go through with it.

I wonder what those people in the shouting crowd that first Palm Sunday thought they were doing? We are just the same as them. Excitement, anticipation, echoes of Scripture and prophecy may all have been reverberating within them, but we are all fallible people. We get enthusiastic one minute, then events

discourage us and we forget what seemed so sure and so right before. We doubt in the dark what we heard in the light.

Like that excited crowd, we are actually part of something much bigger, much more important, much more far-reaching than our human minds can comprehend. A parable of Jesus helps us see this. He talks about two men who did well in their investment opportunities and one who hid the money entrusted to him in the ground. To reward the best investor, the Lord says "OK, now you are in charge of ten cities!" This of course, is a word-picture, not something literal, but it means our thoughts and actions here on earth can have far-reaching consequences and enormous rewards.

It all means we are not insignificant. Our words and actions, when they are in sync with Jesus, have enormous potential, despite what we might think. We might think that little nudge to visit someone is just our own thought with no particular consequence, but God uses us nevertheless for his purposes. He is a master at timing! I don't know how he does it, but there was the donkey, tied up at the entrance to the village, just when Jesus needed it. Timing. He entered the Temple precincts and looked around, but it was late and he went back to Bethany to spend the night. Timing. We get in such a knot when our idea of the right time for something does not work out. Some of us throw tantrums! We need to ask the question, "Lord is that answer to my prayer a "no", or is it just the wrong timing?"

Jesus saw and noted what was going on in the temple, but he held his peace. He slept on it. He hit the pause button. Zeal for his father's house consumed him, but it was not time for action yet.

Jesus knew the dusty road was actually a destiny road. And your daily life is the same. It's a destiny road. Far more hangs on your everyday life than you realise. The God who sees you sitting here sees the time-line of your life. In each part of it he is there, calling you, sending positive influences to you, instructing angels to help you, wanting to walk closely with you but not pushing you or forcing you in any way. If you consistently make an effort to invite him in to these ordinary moments, he has the opportunity to direct you and help you. We all have the chance to tune into Him or to do it in our own strength, the way we've always done it before.

In my home group we are exploring a way to tune into God. It is helping me a lot. We take note of the readings for next Sundays – there are four of them, and we meditate on one reading each day – Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Then when we meet on Friday, we share what God has been saying to us over the week through these Scriptures. We are learning to read expectantly and carefully.

Last week one night I asked the Lord, "What about the Sabbath day? Is it good to keep the Sabbath?" Then in my passage set for the next day's meditation, it said "This is the day that the Lord has made – let us rejoice and be glad in it!" I was thrilled as I felt God was saying, "Yes, the Sabbath is important, but it is not a day to sit with your hands folded, looking pious and avoiding doing worldly stuff, it's a day to rejoice and be glad in your time with me!"

So I have come to a new place on my destiny road. I am trying to tune into God and act on what I hear, just as Jesus did on that dusty road on the way to Jerusalem.

Now to help us understand just how strongly Jesus was saying, "I am the Messiah" and how amazingly he fulfilled many prophecies, let's look at the reading from Zechariah. Zechariah was a prophet just 200 years before Jesus' time.

In chapter 9:9, Zechariah urges us to look for the king who comes to us, “lowly and riding on a donkey.” We can be sure that is referring to Jesus. Jesus is our king. He is the one who rode as a king on a donkey. See v11. He is the one who ratified a covenant with his blood, the covenant which frees prisoners from waterless pits. Waterless pits are places you cannot escape from by yourself. And without water, death is inevitable. If we find ourselves in a disastrous place that seems inescapable, we need to pray “Lord, make me a prisoner of hope, not a prisoner of my circumstances. I refuse to be a victim. Make me a victor in You!”

At no time was Jesus a desperate captive in a place he had no way out of. He was always the King, the victor. He made deliberate choices which sprang out of his relationship with the Father. He chose to get hold of a donkey to ride, which sent out non-spoken messages – “Here I am! I am the King! I am your Messiah!” He provoked the religious and political leaders to face up to who he claimed to be. He showed them who he was by doing miracles that fulfilled Messianic prophecies, like giving sight to the blind. He silenced them by his wisdom when they asked questions to trap and discredit him. He was the victor.

He wants to transform you from being a victim of circumstances, to be a victor in Him. To be someone who is that prisoner of hope whom Zechariah talks about in v12. A prisoner of hope is someone who can't help but be hopeful. As we meditate on the promises of God, we realise that that is indeed our true position.

Zechariah speaks of God's proclamation that he will restore double to us who are prisoners of hope. That means if something has been stolen from us he will restore twice as much. If we have deliberately given up something for the sake of Him and his kingdom, he will restore twice as much to us, if not more.

Jesus was a prisoner of hope himself, in a way. Hebrews 12v2 speaks of him enduring the cross because of the joy that was set before him. He endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated in triumph in heaven. That hope, which is confident expectation, was always there, reminding him of the joy yet to come.

Even if we face adversity, persecution, affliction, hardship or disaster, God's remarkable purpose for us is so much better, that it is not to be compared with this life's sufferings, says Paul. God gives us spiritual strength to endure the trials of life. Paul says to us that we do not face life's problems alone, but we do so with the Holy Spirit — through Christ in us.

Today's epistle reading was written while Paul was in prison. But Paul is no bootstrap psychologist. He doesn't say, “Your effort can save you! Smile! Your choices are what set your destiny!” He does not urge people to put on a joyful mask, to pretend or manufacture confidence and exultation. He experienced and talked of *joy and peace within* because these are fruits of the Holy Spirit living within us. He talks in chapter 4 of Philippians about the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, which guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus - and this is not just cheap talk, not just black letters on a white page – he tells us practically how to obtain this peace. Read for yourself later in Philippians 4.

Part of receiving that peace is by being thankful, as we read in the Psalm for today –

Psalm 118 v 19 “I will enter and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter.

Thanksgiving is the gateway into his presence. That's why it is so helpful to start our daily devotional time with a focus on what we can be thankful for. Being thankful is a good choice. It sets our feet on the path to peace. Whoever heard of a peaceful person who was continually grumbling & complaining?

The choice Jesus exercised was whether to listen and obey or to do it by himself. All his choices were, "Yes, I will listen and obey." He did not deny his natural feelings and thoughts, but offered them to his heavenly father and choose the path shown to him. The agony in the garden of Gethsemane was the outworking of this - Let this cup pass from me, yet not my will, but yours be done.

So his obedient steps led him from the dusty road going towards Jerusalem to the cross and beyond, to the joy that was set before him. We are part of that joy! We are part of his reward! Our part is to like him, trust and obey. We may not know where our obedient steps are going to lead us, but that is not our responsibility. Our responsibility is to listen and obey. Then we, as prisoners of hope, can be sure of hearing, "Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your master."

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