

Kingdom Come

Zechariah 8: 1 – 8, Luke 1: 13 – 19

Makemie Presbyterian Church

December 2, 2007 1st Sunday of Advent

Zechariah 8: 1 - 8

God's Promises to Zion

The word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath. Thus says the Lord: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. Thus says the Lord of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the Lord of hosts? Thus says the Lord of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.

Luke 1: 13 - 19

But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.'

The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.'

This ends the reading.

All right. So here we have two Zechariah's telling us about the coming kingdom of God. The Old Testament Zechariah describes the kingdom as a place where old and young sit and play together. The New Testament Zechariah is visited by my favorite angel, Gabriel, who says Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth will have a son who will "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Now the name Zechariah means the remembrance of the Lord, and is the ancient form of our modern day Zachary. Zechariah is through his life and descriptions helping to get us ready for the kingdom that is coming in the form of a baby.

Every Sunday we pray the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We pray for God to bring in the kingdom of heaven, but I wonder if we really want it? Do really want the kingdom of God to come. Do we think it is really good news? That is the question. And every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we look forward to the coming of that kingdom. In the words of Paul, "as often as we eat the bread & drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again."

Jesus taught in his parables, that the kingdom of God was like a pearl of great price, or like a treasure uncovered in a field, so valuable and so desirable that we would be willing to sell everything we had in order to

obtain it, but who among us would be willing to make that sacrifice? We are not all that sure that we want the kingdom of God to come. And the reasons for that are clear.

In the first place we are a comfortable people. We like our life as it is. Despite all the problems that we Americans have with our marriages or money or jobs or families, we are fairly content. Polls are occasionally taken of the American public that show around sixty to seventy-five percent of us are satisfied with our lives. Preachers, and indeed our writers and artists are accustomed to painting gloomy pictures of us. But I'm not sure that is an accurate portrayal of our everyday lives. Most of us have families and friends whom we enjoy and jobs that keep us busy and happy and a religious faith that sustains in rough times. And while we may pray every Sunday for the kingdom of God to come, we probably would add, "but not yet." Thy kingdom come Lord, but maybe not just yet.

For the first time in history, those of us in the Western world have built societies in which most human beings no longer have to worry about the basic necessities of life. Ever since the human race began, its societies have been concerned about one thing – how to stay alive: about where the

next meal is coming from, about providing shelter to live in, about having clothes enough to protect against the elements.

That was true of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who listened to Zechariah's preaching about the kingdom. They were a ragtag bunch of refugees who had managed to survive the Babylonian destruction of their country in 587 BC. Some of them had spent years of exile in Babylonia before being allowed to return to Palestine. Others, who were among the poorer classes, simply scraped out a living in that devastated land as best they could. The temple was a burned out ruin. The city walls were nothing but rubble. Drought and blight withered their crops and hunger was rampant. Inflation, caused by a shortage of goods, ate up their meager earnings. They no longer had a king or national government. They were just a tiny impoverished sub-province in the vast Persian Empire. Their life was a matter of grubbing for the basic necessities of life, so it's no wonder they heard Zechariah gladly when he preached this passage to them about the coming of the kingdom of God. They needed something better, because they had to worry about simply managing to exist.

But that's no longer true for most of us. We no longer worry about getting enough to eat. On the contrary we worry about getting too fat. We even worry about our cats and dogs getting too fat, so we put them on diets

too. We're so free of anxieties about the basic necessities of life that we now worry about which computer to buy, or about how many we should plan on for the party on Saturday night, or about which fast food chain puts the most beef in its hamburgers. We pretty much got it made, we think, so who wants to leave all that for some unknown realm called the kingdom of God?. We pray in the Lord's Prayer for God's kingdom to come, but we're not sure we want it.

Now in the Bible there is a reality to heaven; it is the dwelling place of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. And the Bible simply strains at the limits of human language to describe that dwelling place. But alongside that our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Zechariah gives us another picture of the kingdom of God. And it is a picture that participates very much in the realities of earth. We heard Ted read just a moment ago,

Thus says the Lord: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city. Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.

What is the kingdom of God according to the prophet Zechariah? It is a public park. It's a park where old people are no longer cold and lonely and ill and senile, but participants in the community. It's a public park where the elderly can sit together and bask in the sun, and talk and laugh over the good old days in full vigor and clear mind and satisfaction of life.

The kingdom of God is a public park where the little children can run and play in its squares, in safety and fun and delight. It's a place where no child is unwanted or abused or malnourished, and where there is not even a bully among the group, shoving and taunting the littler ones until they break into tears. The kingdom of God, says Zechariah is a public park where the streets are safe for children.

The kingdom of God according to the Bible, is not a never-never land in the sweet by and by. Most of the Bible is not interested in heaven. Because the kingdom of God is life on this earth – life transformed to the will and purpose of a loving God. The Lord's Prayer does not say, "thy kingdom come in heaven." It says, "Thy kingdom come on earth, like it is in heaven." God works to accomplish God's will for the earth. God works to accomplish God's purpose and intention for human life in the world, here and now.

Zechariah further tells us that the kingdom will not come until our children are also fit for the streets. And that means that you and I have work to do. Now don't misunderstand me. Human beings by our efforts can't create the kingdom. Only God. But we have Zechariah's vision of what God's final purpose is for this planet of ours, we can at least say yes to that purpose for good and try to live our lives in accordance. And that means we have work to do as parents and grandparents, as teachers and examples and leaders. It's not enough that we accept God's purpose by working with society to make our streets fit for children; we also have to work in our homes and our schools and our churches to raise children fit for our streets.

There is this story of a group of civic minded individuals who met with a juvenile court judge to ask him what the most important thing was they could do to improve their community. The judge replied in six simple words, "Be at home for your children."

Now, I'm not trying to discourage us in our efforts to improve our community – those efforts, I think, need to be made, and we are deeply indebted to our volunteers. It's also not to ignore the fact we have jobs we must attend to. But it is to emphasize that question we need to ask ourselves: are we raising children who are fit for our streets?

A child who has not been taught right from wrong is not fit to be loosed on society. A child who has no discipline is a child without limits on her selfishness. A child who had not been loved and encouraged and praised and hugged is a child who is at a disadvantage when it comes to loving others. And yes, a child who has not been taught that there is a sovereign God to whom he is responsible is a child who will have a harder time using their God given talents wisely and who will have trouble finding their purpose and meaning in life. Are we raising children who can contribute to their fellow human beings, who know how to love God and neighbor? Or are we perpetuating the evils of life in the offspring entrusted to us? Those are questions we need to ask. Are we raising children who are the kingdom of God?

Our Lord came preaching the kingdom of God, and in parable after parable he instructs us how to become citizens of it. We can't earn our way into the kingdom of God, he says, by our own good deeds and our own fine works. For the kingdom is a gift given to all workers, equally in the vineyard. Nor can we buy our way into God's peaceable realm, no matter how liquid our capital. We may be able to buy the best clothes, and sirloin steak and a summer home. But we can't buy the kingdom of God that

Zechariah pictures with its peace and contentment, its secure joy and its happy elders and children. We must trust God.

And so it finally comes down to this. To this story we heard for our New Testament lesson. It comes down to our depending on God like a child depends on their parents. For in the kingdom of God, God is truly king. God rules. God orders life. God's will is done. And until we stop trying to be our own gods and goddesses, until we cease making decisions apart from God's will as given in the scriptures, until we stop thinking that anything goes and start asking what God wants, until we quit relying on our own petty strength to live righteous and meaningful and decent lives in this world, we will never be ready to live in the kingdom of God and neither will our children. It is no wonder that Zechariah can picture that happy public park in his prophecy; because the happiness of that park depends on something else – it depends on the fact that God dwells in the midst of that city and orders and rules its life.

And so we see, if our children are to be raised to be fit for the streets of any town, they need to be raised by parents and adults who depend on the will and power of God. They need the example of adults who themselves have become humble, as a little child is humble. Children need

to be guided by parents who pray, “Our Father, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

And when we pray that prayer, with all our hearts and minds and strength, then maybe we and our children will be ready to receive our King, and his kingdom that is coming.

It began to come down that night when one Child, who is fit for all streets and all hearts, all places and all times, was born in the city of Bethlehem. It began when God, became incarnate in that Child, drew near to us and took up dwelling in our midst in fulfillment of Zechariah’s promise. It began when that one Child, grown up, died on the cross and was raised and became victor over all the evil and violence, all the ugliness and death that haunts our communities.

We know in Jesus Christ, that Zechariah’s promise is fully filled, and that our town, and the cities of the world, will be faithful places. God dwells in the midst of us, Emmanuel. And old women and old men shall sit in the park, each with a staff in hand for their very great age. And the streets shall be full of boys and girls playing.

Today we begin the wait, for thy kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven, born in Bethlehem. Amen.