

Hope & Promise (Rev. Ron McConnell)

Sermon February 12, 2023

The words of scripture we heard today from the book of the prophet Zechariah, were written in the years between 520 and 518 BCE. They were addressed to a shattered-community of people barely existing, starving, mourning their dead, staggering about in the ruins of what was left of their beloved city, Jerusalem. The Babylonian army had swept-in, overrun and destroyed Israel's Holy City. Even the Temple – a visible sign of God's presence with God's people – had been destroyed; reduced to charred-wood and broken rocks strewn in the street.

The Israelites who survived this assault of Jerusalem – those, at least, who were healthy and strong; or who had some useful skill or trade; or who, like the priests and community leaders, could potentially be subversives and leaders of a rebellion, were taken as prisoners by their captors and hauled-off into exile in Babylon.

Those Israelites who remained in the ruins watched as their family members, neighbours and friends were taken away. Left behind in the ashes of what once was Jerusalem, these were the weak and frail ones, the very old and very young, elders and small children. These were viewed by their oppressors to be of little worth; of no use and having no strength for the back-breaking forced labour awaiting in Babylon. These people, left behind in what was left of Jerusalem, were the human rubble and remains of what once been had a great city, a faithful community, a full congregation, and healthy society. And yet it was these very people – the left behind – to whom the prophet Zechariah speaks the words we also heard this day.

Zechariah tells them – as he tells us – the good news of what it will be like when God's will is done on earth as in heaven; when God's world is restored to the way God means for it to be.

Zechariah says, "Old men and old women will again sit safely outside, and, will take delight in seeing all the boys and girls playing safely in the streets."

I love this image. This image that Zechariah uses to speak of God's reign; to speak of the world that God has made and will remake; this vision of God's peaceable kingdom-come. Don't you like this image; this vision, too?

It reminds me of when I was a small boy growing up in Winnipeg. My friend Ricky Cunningham and his family lived down the street from me, and Ricky's Grandpa lived with the family too. All of us boys and girls in the neighbourhood knew him as "Grandpa Cunningham." He was "Grandpa" to us all.

Now Grandpa Cunningham was not very steady on his feet. He used a cane to help him get around. I suppose his feet tended to swell, because instead of wearing shoes he wore his bedroom slippers both inside and outside the house.

Cane in hand, bedroom slippers on his feet, Grandpa Cunningham walked round the neighbourhood twice a day, his little dog – a short-legged, black dachshund named Blitzen – walking close beside him.

In the summer, we children of the neighbourhood spent many warm sunny days playing on the front lawn of my friend Ricky's home. Why there? Because that is where Grandpa Cunningham would often sit in a lawn chair; Blitzen lying right beside him. As he sat there, Grandpa's swollen hands would rest folded-over atop the curved-handle of his cane upon which

he leaned. It's this picture that I see when Zechariah declares: "Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in their hand because of their old age."

It was there with Grandpa Cunningham that all us kids wanted to be. He delighted in watching we boys and girls doing summersaults and handstands, or wrestling and playing tag with one another. We children loved to make him laugh, while he loved to reward us with the candies he carried in his pocket.

Do you remember those big, round, hard, peppermint candies called Scotch mints? Well, Grandpa always had a cellophane package of Scotch mints in his pocket. When he gave them out to us children who had been playing in their yard, he would have us line-up before him as he sat in his lawn chair. Then, each in turn, he had us come forward. We would take our turns standing there and watching as Grandpa's arthritic fingers slowly squeezed – slowly on purpose, now I think – squeezed one candy at a time to the top of the package and out a hole at the corner which Grandpa had made there. He would let the candy drop into our open hands.

There were things I learned later in life about some of the tough, painful struggles Grandpa Cunningham had in his life. And there were things I learned later about the struggles that some of the kids in my neighbourhood experienced in childhood and in later life. Yet, even with this knowledge now, still, it was clear to me back then as it is clear in my memory today - that, while sitting there in his lawn chair Grandpa Cunningham took great delight in us children. And we children, while playing before him and making him laugh, took delight in him.

Grandpa Cunningham and we children playing and laughing together, both to his pleasure and amusement as well as ours. Were we not then, together, something like the prophet Zechariah's image of God's peaceable kingdom? A Scotch mint for communion.

What does it look like when God's will is done on earth as in heaven; when God's world is restored to the way God means for it to be? The prophet Zechariah offers this vision of God's reign, God's peaceable reign, and it appeals to me greatly. It is the image of all God's children, the very young and the very old, playing together; playing before and with one another; delighting in and finding joy in one another; finding comfort and support with one another

I doubt Grandpa Cunningham expected his grandson Ricky's friend, Ronnie McConnell, would even remember him some sixty years later; let alone be telling you about him during worship now in the year 2023. He did leave an indelible mark on me. As perhaps your own grandparents - both the familial and the neighbourly grandparents you have known - have left an indelible mark on you. As you yourself are now leaving an indelible mark upon the grandchildren who are a part of your family; or those neighbourhood strays, as I once was, whom you have picked-up and added to your grandchildren along the way.

Have you and I not glimpsed something of Zechariah's vision? Even in the midst of our own tough times, hard losses, and painful struggles – or those of our churches and our world. Even then, have we not caught sight in the corner of our eye (or have we not heard as a whisper in our ear) something of God's Presence, God's Spirit, God's Word, God's Peace, and God's Will for us, our churches and our world? Have we not been given, at the very least, the gift of God's Hope for us, for our churches and our world? Are we doing what we can ourselves to help squeeze that sweet gift of God's Hope up within the cellophane package that is ourselves, that is our church, and that is our world?

What I believe I know to be true is that you and I have been called, even now, to delight in the play of God's Spirit, in the comfort of God's Grace, in the power of God's Love, and in God's promise of New Life.

So let us rejoice and be glad at whatever age we find ourselves today. Let us remember the children, and the grandpas and grandmas, in whom we have delighted through the years; those we have loved and who have loved us. Those who have left their own indelible mark of upon us. And let us also delight in the truth that God loves and delights in us, still. God delights in each and all of you; beloved children of God. For this is who we are. This is who you are – God’s beloved children with whom, now and always, God is well pleased. //

There is a poem written by the poet Anne Porter that, given today’s scripture reading and sermon, seems right to me to read for you now. The poet calls her poem “Susanna” –

Nobody in the hospital
 Could tell the age
 Of the old woman
 Who was called Susanna

I knew she spoke some English
 And that she was an immigrant
 Out of a little country
 Trampled by armies

Because she had no visitors
 I would stop by to see her
 But she was always sleeping

All I could do
 Was to get out her comb
 And carefully untangle
 The tangles in her hair

One day I was beside her
 When she woke up
 Opening small dark eyes
 Of a surprising clearness

She looked at me and said
 You want to know the truth?
 I answered Yes

She said it’s something that
 My mother told me

There’s not a single inch
 Of our body
 That the Lord does not love

She then went back to sleep