

Series: The Minor Prophets
Today: Zechariah: Rebuild the People
Text: Zechariah 8:1-17

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
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Each week I have been making the same statement about the Minor Prophets; that they are minor in terms of the amount they wrote, but not minor in the weight of their content. Today we meet Zechariah who actually wrote a bit more than some of the other prophets we have met in this series.

If we know anything of Zechariah's prophecy, it is probably only knowing a few words from one of the oracles he wrote as the prophecy of Palm Sunday about the king coming to power riding on the back of a donkey (Zech. 9:9). The prophecy itself is fourteen chapters long, and it is filled with Technicolor messages and visions that are worthy of the big screen; images of what God intends to do with the people of Israel. The images are not the same, nor is the language, that we have found in the other Minor Prophets, and it can be confusing out of context. We expect to find some of the images which Zechariah shares with his readers in what we call apocalyptic literature; books like Daniel or Ezekiel or Revelation.

If you were here last week, you met Zechariah's contemporary, Haggai. Both of their prophecies are dated around about 520 B.C. You may recall that Haggai's message to the Israelites was an admonition to rebuild the Temple which had been in ruins for nearly 70 years following the Babylonian invasion in 587 B.C. Haggai urged the people to honor God by rebuilding the House of God. While Zechariah is also concerned about rebuilding the Temple, his concern goes deeper than just a building. He is concerned

about rebuilding a people; a people whose self-image had been destroyed after 70 years of exile in a foreign land.

When the Babylonians invaded Israel and destroyed the Temple, they also forced some of the Israelites to follow them back to Persia where they had lived as slaves. They had surrendered the customs and traditions which gave them an identity as the chosen people of God. They had worshipped the Babylonian gods in order to get along with their captors. Eugene Peterson says this of Zechariah's writing: *Zechariah was a major factor in recovering the magnificence from the ruins of a degrading exile. He [Zechariah] reinvigorated their imaginations with his visions and messages. The visions provided images of a sovereign God that worked their way into the lives of the people, countering the long ordeal of debasement and ridicule. The messages forged a fresh vocabulary that gave energy and credibility to the long-term purposes of God being worked out in their lives. But that isn't the end of Zechariah's messages...[they] are still at work, like time capsules in the lives of God's people, continuing to release insight and hope and clarity for the people whom God is still using to work out his purposes in a world that has no language for God and the purposes of God (The Message, p. 1713).*

This morning I would like to examine one of the eight messages which is contained in Zechariah. We turn to chapter 8 to consider what Zechariah said, and what he meant and what its meaning might be for the 21st century. If you will allow me, I would like to divide the message in three parts: God's Commitment to Bring Exiles Home; God's Expectations of Responsibility of People who are Blessed; God's Guidance to the People about Living in Community.

God's Commitment to Bring Exiles Home

The message of Zechariah in Chapter 8 begins with a statement of God's commitment to bring the exiles home. To a people who had been used and abused as slaves in Babylon, it is a message of hope. They are not forgotten. In fact, through the prophet, God says he is jealous for them. Zechariah tells them that the same God who allowed them to be carried off into captivity now wants what is best for them. He tells them that God is jealous for their return to Zion; that God longs for their return to Jerusalem. The time for separation has ended. God intends to help them find their way home and make it a place where old people thrive and young people laugh. God intends to help them find their way back home.

Tim Bayly, a pastor in Indiana, tells the story of how he found his way back into the Christian faith. His father, Joe Bayly, is a Christian author and minister, and Tim's behavior had been the cause of great heartache for him. After a confrontation one night, Joe told Tim he thought it was best if he left home and lived on his own.

Then late one night, Joe got a phone call. "This is the police," the voice said. "Your son has been arrested on drug charges, and we have him here at the station." Joe got out of bed and drove a half hour to the jail where the man on the phone had told him his son was being held, no one there had ever heard of his son. Joe thought he had driven to the wrong police station, so he drove to three others trying to find Tim. No one knew anything about his arrest.

Finally, around 2:00 a.m., Joe decided to go to Tim's house and see if he was there. The front door wasn't locked, so Joe entered and began to go from bedroom to

bedroom looking for his son. He found Tim upstairs, fast asleep. Joe walked over and knelt by Tim's bed. Shaking him awake, Joe asked, *"Tim, are you all right?"*

Tim awoke and, seeing his Dad frantic with concern, answered, *"Yes Dad—I'm all right. Why? What's wrong?"* Joe told Tim how someone had called in the middle of the night saying he had been arrested. Then Joe and Tim kissed each other goodnight, and Joe drove home.

Years later, Tim explained how God had used that night as a key part of restoring the faith he had lost along the way. *"Remember that night when you got a call that I was in jail?"* he told his father. *"Dad, I'll never forget you kneeling next to my bed, kissing me, and telling me you loved me. It was the night I began my journey back to the faith that you love and the faith that sustains me today. You loved me enough to discipline me and let me go, and yet you searched me out when you thought I was in trouble. It was the closest I had ever come to experiencing the love of God, and I am grateful for that witness."* (Source: Tim Bayly in an interview)

Zechariah reminds the people of God's desire that they return home; return to their roots; recapture their identity. This is the first portion of his prophecy in chapter 8.

God's Expectations of Responsibility for People Who Are Blessed

The next section of our text is God's expectation of the people whom he loves. Even as God has promised to return Israel to its home, there is an expectation that the people are to do something when they get there. *"Let your hands be strong...I will save you, and you shall be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong."* (vv. 9, 13)

The expectation is no different than it was in the very first book of the Bible. When God made the covenant with Abraham, he promised that Abraham would be blessed that he might be a blessing to all the people of the earth. Now Zechariah joins his colleague, Haggai, and urges Israel to receive its blessing from God and then be a blessing to others.

Every day since we returned from Kenya people have been asking me, “*How was the trip?*” I know they want me to say it was wonderful and meaningful, and they would be right for every time I go to Kenya I come home with my faith challenged and deepened. However, I must tell you that it is very hard to go to Kiambaa and enter into the poverty that is ever present there, and then return to the abundance we have in this country.

It is hard to visit the homes of people who do not have adequate food for their children and return to a country struggling with childhood obesity. It is hard to experience the lack of choices that people have in Kenya and then return to the abundance of this country. On the streets of Kiambaa, there may or may not be simple things like bread and milk and cereal, and if there are any of these items, there will be only one choice of brand. It is hard to return to a country where we have so much when I have been in a place that has so little.

I wish I could take each of you with me to Kiambaa or to visit the Masai in the Ngong Hills for just one day. That is all it would take. Just one day, and I virtually guarantee you that you will know that we are the blessed of the world, and it is our responsibility to be a blessing. It is our responsibility to use the abundance that God has given us to help make a difference in the lives of those who have so little. Let our hands

be strong and build a world where the disparity between the haves and the have-nots of the world is erased and all of God's children are blessed.

God's Guidance to the People about Living in Community

Finally, Zechariah gives some direct guidance to the people whom God loves in verses 16-17: 16 These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; 17 do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the LORD.

If I were to paraphrase all this advice of the prophet, it would be direct and simple. *"Create a sense of community which grounds you so that you won't be confused in a world filled with lies."*

In her book Traveling Mercies, Anne Lamott shares a story she once heard from her minister that illustrates well the necessary presence of others in our journey of faith; people who will tell us the truth in love and love the truth they tell. The story was about a little girl who got lost one day in the city where she lived.

The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, "You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here."

Lamott responds to that story: And that is why I have stayed so close to [my church]—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when

I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home. (Source: Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies (Anchor, 1999), p. 55)

This is the guidance of the Prophet. Speak the truth to one another. Don't judge each other. Do not approach each other with evil in your hearts. It is direct, and it is practical. It is the Word of the Lord.

Conclusion

Zechariah is a Minor Prophet with a major message, as all the prophet's in this series have been. His prophecy was about rebuilding the people. He was supportive of rebuilding the Temple, but he knew that buildings reflect the character of the people who inhabit them. Unless the people who went to the Temple had had their own sense of worth restored, it would be difficult for them to be God's faithful witnesses. So he urged and encouraged his listeners to take time to rebuild the people into people of character worthy of the Kingdom of God. His advice is still good for us as we live out our lives with one another.