

# *The Things That Make for Peace*

by

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Readings: Zechariah 9:9-12

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Romans 7:15-25

One of the challenges before anyone who preaches from an ancient text is finding the contemporary element in that text. This morning's lesson, from Zechariah, is a good example of ancient prophetic writings by one who was convinced that the way to peace is found through following God's way, not merely humanity's way. He seems to believe that our troubles with war (and resistance to God's rule rather than ours), absence of hope, and a lack of fulfillment (aka "wholeness") begin with our determination to direct our lives in accord with our ways instead of in accord with God's ways. Nearly three thousand years later we are still struggling with that very conflict: Our ways for getting along with others vs. God's way for living with others.

Do you remember that category on our grade cards when we were in kindergarten and elementary school which asked “Plays well with others?” It still comes to mind when we, half seriously, look for ways to describe fellow workers or friends and neighbors. We are aware of those who seem always to want their way and will pay nearly any cost to get it. We work with those who have difficulty cooperating with the team or with asking, “What is best for the organization on this matter?”

“Plays well with others,” can apply to adults also and has to do with what kind of effort we give to our topic of peacemaking. It touches a wide territory of behavior, from our views on gun control, to our thoughts about conflict among nations, to our views on revolutionary movements in the Middle East, to our expectations about Congress in the current debt crisis.

The connection between getting along with others and the pursuit of those things that make for peace is as old as the prophet Zechariah and as new as the morning headlines. And whether our grounding is in pursuing our interests alone instead of a heavy dose of God’s interests is also as relevant and current today as it was in Zechariah’s time. The prophet was speaking about a matter that is timeless: The things that make for peace.

## II

If people today are going to work for the peace that old Zechariah says is possible if we follow God's way, they will need to believe that here truly is reason to be hopeful that peace can prevail in our world today. People need to believe that the current status of world unrest is not the end. People want to believe there is something else for them other than a lack of hope that things will get any better.

Giving such hope is akin to a therapist convincing the suicidal patient that she can accept herself as she is, moving on from that starting point to even greater embracing of self. Listen and you will hear echoes of God's promise to love us as we are, no matter what, giving us a foundation on which to build relationships with others and with God. Here is where hope for ourselves, hope for furthering our relationships with others, and even hope for the peace in our conflicted world begins. A restoration of peace can only begin where the people have hope that such a longed-for restoration is possible. Giving the people assurance that such hope is justified is a large part of the Prophet Zechariah's testimony.

It has been said, "If you want peace, work for justice." We get the point. One commentator

goes on, reminding us that “Franciscan spirituality teaches...that we cannot be *of* the poor and the oppressed, because many of us are not poor or oppressed. We cannot be *for* the poor and oppressed because that is just another form of control. Nevertheless, we must stand *with* the poor and the oppressed. Our salvation, our wholeness, and our peace are found finally in the authentic justice and wholeness of all others. Show us a peace-giving and foot-washing congregation, and we will show you a changing neighborhood around it. Show us a justice-driven congregation, and we will show you a changing city.<sup>1</sup>

As valuable as the *promise of hope* is to our efforts for peace within and beyond our relationships with others, so too is the *promise of wholeness* to bring an end to our brokenness in our community, our country and the world. *Wholeness* is understood here as a restoration to what we were meant to be. Ultimately it has to do with restoration to the relationship we are meant to have with God. We will get to that before we are done here but for the moment I want to call attention to how the text gives an image of wholeness that is the opposite of the image popular in our culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, commentary on the lectionary text for t his date.

There is a place, early in the text (9:9-10) where Zechariah makes reference to the restoration of wholeness in “God’s own fashion.” God’s notion of wholeness is not so much in terms of heroic strength and power over others (like a war-horse pulling a king in a chariot) but like another kind of king who enters your life riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. In other words, Zechariah is prophesying here what we know to be true: when it comes to the restoration of wholeness, the ways of God are often just the opposite of the ways of the world. Not riding behind a war-horse pulling a chariot but riding on a beast of burden, his feet nearly touching the ground, your king of life, your king of hope, your king of wholeness enters your life and your world. This is Zechariah’s declaration: that the God of Zion is re-writing the book on the things that make for peace. Not power and control that lead to war, but service and cooperation which lead to peace. That is what this God seeks and expects of us. This is how our brokenness is transformed into wholeness.

### III

It is a short trip from this line of thinking to the prophet’s promise of a restoration of God’s rule. He is really reflecting on the foundational

idea that the promise of hope and the promise of wholeness are built on. This is the prophet's argument that God's way needs to prevail over our way if there is ever to be an alternative to humankind's preference for the war-horse and machines of destruction over the beast and plow that cuts the earth and plants the seed, cultivates growth and celebrates the harvest.

Similarly, humankind's preference for all manner of power and control in the affairs of people and nations must bow to the command and expectation of God that the people of God will live in such a way that peace and community take priority over all self-serving interests. Think of what a difference a solid grasp and acceptance of that expectation could make in the legislatures of our world and the communities of our region.

To Zechariah it is foundational to expect the people who claim to be God's people to live as though they really are that: a people who are more willing to live by and serve God's ways than those of the world's ways. It is as though he is declaring then, and now, that the world's way of the war-horse has been tried and found wanting. Isn't it time we committed ourselves to God's way of the lowly donkey that carries the messenger of peace?

It is a worthy challenge for any nation, especially ours, on the July 4 anniversary of a new beginning in 1776 at Philadelphia, founded on the promises of freedom in pursuit of peace among the peoples and the nations.

Thanks be to God for his prophetic word to us in these troubled days.