



Emmaus Road: The Unlikely King

Zechariah 9:9-17

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When I was in seminary beginning my studies in the Master of Divinity program, one of the first classes on Biblical history sought to explain the canonization process for the Bible as we have it today. The intent of the class was to help us understand why certain books, like the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – were included in the Bible, while other books, like the Gospel of Mary Magdalene and the Gospel of Thomas, were left out. I remember the professor naming that one of the primary stipulations for a book to be included in the Biblical canon, was that the message of the text had to further their agreed upon understanding of who God is, and who Christ is as the Messiah – the Son of God. If a narrative text – if one of these ancient scrolls – deviated from the understood truth of God, the text was excluded.

The same was true about the texts themselves. We know that the Gospel authors chose specific stories to include in their narratives about Christ. In some places, they use the same stories, while in other places, they use unique stories. Part of the discrepancies, or differences, in their story telling is based on the audience to whom they were writing. They wrote for different communities, and they had different purposes in their writing. These distinct intentions are on display in places like the Sermon on the Mount, where Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*,” while Luke quotes Jesus as saying, “Blessed are *the poor*.”

Though writing to different communities with different intentions in their story telling, it is clear that in the process of writing and in the process of forming the Biblical canon, every story is included with reason. Every pericope (that is, every story within the text) is important. Sometimes the importance of the text reveals itself; in the gospels this often happens with Jesus taking the disciples aside to explain a parable. Other times, the text is left unexplained, and it is up to us to discern its importance and meaning.

I find Luke 24:27 to fit in to this latter category. It is a text with great significance, but one that does not reveal itself. After Jesus’ crucifixion, and after his body went missing from the grave, those who had followed Jesus began to fear and have doubt – was Jesus really the Messiah? How could such a death befall the one who was promised to save Israel?

In Luke 24, we find the resurrected Lord joins two disciples who are walking from Jerusalem toward Emmaus, and he asks this question of the disciples, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then verse 27 reads, “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

Luke does not flesh out the texts Jesus would have used, but this seems vitally important in the revelation of who Jesus is. It defines Jesus in accordance with the Hebrew Scriptures that shaped the Jewish faith, and thus, are the underlying stories that give foundation to our faith of Christianity.

So, in these first weeks of the year following the Epiphany, we are looking to shine a light on who Jesus is using texts from the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus would have possibly used in this conversation on the road to Emmaus. What stories might Jesus have used to help these downtrodden and disappointed disciples have a renewed faith in him, Jesus, as the Messiah of God?

In the past few weeks, we've looked at prophecies from Micah, Malachi, Nathan, and Isaiah. Today, we turn to Zechariah.

Zechariah is the penultimate book in our Old Testament, coming just before Malachi. Zechariah served as a prophet in the late 6th Century BCE after the Edict of Cyrus gave permission for the Israelites to return to their homeland following the Babylonian Exile. Zechariah would have been a prophet who was focused on helping the people rebuild following their return to a shattered homeland.

In this 9th Chapter of Zechariah, the prophet begins in the first 8 verses by declaring God's intent to cast judgement on those who had oppressed the Israelites. "The king shall perish from Gaza ... Ashkelon shall be uninhabited ... I will make an end of the pride of Philistia." There is, in the opening of this chapter, a vision of a coming apocalyptic battle, wherein God will encamp with the Israelites and be their protector. With the security of this warrior God, "No oppressor shall again overrun them."

There are many texts in the Hebrew Scriptures that define God in this way, as a militaristic force who will provide Israel's security. We often name how wrong the Israelites were for awaiting a savior to come who would lead them in militaristic conquest. They seemed to be anticipating a Messiah who would destroy their enemies through might. Texts like this, Zechariah 9:1-8, seem to support such a vision.

This is why I often say, you cannot read any of our Biblical text out of its greater context. Every text is situated within the framework of a larger story. This leads us to our reading for this morning, beginning in verse 9.

Zechariah begins, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he."

I'm stopping here on purpose, right in the middle of verse 9, because these opening words confirm what the Israelites had long awaited. They yearned for a king who would come and lead them in a militaristic way to smite those who had taken them into exile, who had ravaged the Temple, who had separated their families.

I have little doubt that this was part of the disappointment those two disciples felt while walking from Jerusalem down the Emmaus Road. Jesus was said to be the promised Messiah, the one who would

fulfill the promises of what we'll call Zechariah 9:1-9a – the part of the text that declares such militaristic might that ends in victory and triumph.

But Zechariah's prophecy does not end after the first half of the 9th verse. We must keep reading.

"Your king comes to you," it says, "humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

This text is picked up by all four Gospel writers as Jesus prepared to enter Jerusalem on (what we call) Palm Sunday. Jesus told the disciples to go and untie the colt at the city's entrance, and to bring it to him. As he rode in to Jerusalem on the colt down the Mount of Olives through the Kidron Valley, he was hailed by the throngs of people lining the road as they exclaimed, 'Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!' They took off their cloaks and laid them on the road in a sign of appreciation for the arrival of the king.

Professor David Petersen notes, "We know that human kings in the ancient Near East, particularly in the second millennium BCE texts, rode donkeys."ⁱ It's not Jesus' riding a donkey that is so remarkable. Petersen continues, what sets this text apart as being so different from the normalcy of kings is the term "humble." This was not the way of ancient kings.

The invitation to understand this king as a *humble* king picks up on a few important themes of the Hebrew Scriptures.

First, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets speak of humility in reference to community.ⁱⁱ Humility is necessary for *shalom* – the peace that God wills for the corporate body. The wholeness of *shalom* is not possible without the humility of each in the community, and this begins with the presentation of a humble king. This king will not lead as those who seek personal glory, but this king will lead as one of the people, seeking the glory of the whole, not the self.

Second, this humility is characteristic of one who acknowledges from where their glory comes. "The Messiah is "humble" because he is the recipient of God's saving action. ... He has no glory in himself, but is given his majesty by God. He has no authority except that bestowed on him by his Lord."ⁱⁱⁱ No doubt, as Jesus is walking with the disciples on the Emmaus Road, he would have reminded them of all the times he had taught about listening to God. That even when we pray, we pray asking God to provide our daily sustenance – our daily bread.

Finally, the humility is defined as securing victory in ways that are antithetical to the ways of empires. "We need a power, a wisdom, a shepherding beyond our own temptations and limitations; and it is the coming of such a wise and powerful and peaceful shepherd that is announced here to Israel."^{iv} As we keep reading in the text, what we find is that it is possible to maintain power, to maintain victory, while using the force of peace.

Beginning in verse 10, we read, "[God] shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth." Author Daniel Clendenin offers, "The future

kingdom is peaceable not provocational. It's also universal, extending to the ends of the earth, rather than ethnocentric, nationalistic, or narcissistic."^v

Yet, make no doubt, this peace is powerful. The prophet talks about this peace in militaristic ways to define the significance of its power. Verses 11-13 talk about the nation of Judah being bent as a bow, and Ephraim being made into an arrow. The prophet talks about the sons of Zion being used as a sword against the sons of Greece. And yet, when we get to verse 14, we find that there is no militant action taken by Israel, there is just a victory won by God. Verse 14 reads, "The Lord will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lighting." What follow in verse 15 is nothing shy of a description of a complete victory by God. But this victory is not one that invites nationalistic limitations. No, it's one that incorporates the fullness of God into all of humanity.

And this, this is a major shift in the thinking of God's people. It is the reason Christ must talk this out with the disciples on the Emmaus Road. See, Christ did not come to win out so that Israel might claim its rightful place as God's chosen people apart from the rest of humanity. Christ was not just another king in the empirical hope of Jewish history. Christ came so that *humanity* – all of God's created – might win out over the oppressive forces of evil that seek to chain us to earthly desires and that backs us up into nationalistic empires.

What was obvious was that evil was not going to do away with itself. Scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier states it this way, "the Bible is testifying to the fact that evil must be actively resisted and done away. It does not disappear by itself. Hitlers must be made to cease their holocausts; civil rights must be guaranteed with the force of law."^{vi} In the prophecy, we are promised that work will be completed by God, and it will be completed by God in the coming of the Lord. This is the explanation that Christ had to make clear to these downtrodden disciples who felt Christ had failed. In reality, they were walking with the physical manifestation of Christ's victory. God had won out in defeating even death itself. This is the promise of God, the assurance of the covenant. God will win out. Peace, hope, humility, shalom, love shall be the way of God's creation.

As I close, I want to end with this offering by Daniel Clendenin, as he reflects on American Christianity. He writes:

"In 1805 Alexis de Tocqueville landed on the shores of Newport, Rhode Island and began his prescient travelogue that was eventually published as *Democracy in America*. To commemorate that bicentennial, in 2005 the *Atlantic Monthly* commissioned the French intellectual Benard-Henri Lévy to travel extensively in America and report his findings. When Lévy visited Willow Creek megachurch near Chicago, he recorded his impressions of how Americans portrayed the divine: "a God without mystery; a good-guy God; almost a human being, a good American". Clendenin concludes, "I worry that Lévy might be right, that we all too easily create God in our own, self-serving national image. I hope I'm wrong, and I pray that Lévy is wrong."

It seems some 15 years later, Lévy wasn't wrong, at least not according to recent weeks' events and the comments I continue to see come across my Facebook feed. It seems, in large part, we have fallen for the same trap as the ancient Israelites. This trap of evil thoughts that makes us believe that we, as

Americans, in these United States, are somehow more preferred by God than others around the world. As if we are God's favored people, in place of Israel. If we don't think we are loved in a way that others of God's creation aren't loved. I can't help but wonder if we don't need Christ to come and walk with us that we might better understand who he is as the Son of God, as the Messiah of all creation, as the promised king of consummate and powerful peace that expands nations, broadens horizons, and promises new life to each and every one of God's created.

As we walk with Christ, might we have ears to hear and hearts to receive, for God is at work in our midst creating peace among the nations. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ David L. Petersen. *Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi: A Commentary (The Old Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

ⁱⁱ Petersen.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elizabeth Achtemeier. *Nahum-Malachi: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.

^{iv} Achtemeier.

^v David Clendenin. "A King on a Colt?" July 6, 2008. journeywithjesus.net. Retrieved January 27, 2021.

^{vi} Achtemeier.