

Sunday, July 9, 2017
Lectionary 14
5th Sunday after Pentecost
Delivered to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church
1301 N. Broom St Wilmington DE 19806
Rev. Jason Churchill

The opening of the Gospel talks about the way in which we live - in these dualities. We played the flute for you and you were not joyful. We wailed in grief and you did not grieve with us.

You were neither happy nor were you sad.

The prophet that would announce the messiah came fasting and living in poverty - and you said he was possessed. The son of man came and ate with sinners and outcasts and you called him a glutton and drunkard.

What is it, you neither are happy with a prophet that fasts nor are you happy with a prophet that opens the doors to those that were once restricted?

Charles Dickens famously spoke of these dualities in his book *A Tale of Two Cities*:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity (in - cre - jewalty), it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going directly to heaven, we were all going directly the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period that some of the noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil in the superlative degree of comparison only.”

The famous opening talks of the central themes in the book...love and hate, good and evil, light and darkness...the opposing pairs bring in this motif of dualities...separate yet equal in their struggles.

Red and blue, Republican and Democrat, Right and wrong, living and dead...wise and foolish.

When the world is separated into dualities like this expecting the expected is not so difficult. With dualities and poles, with absolute right and absolute wrong we live in a world where the expectations fall in one of the two camps.

Believe me, arguing with someone that is only able to see the world in stark dualities is not easy.

But early on, God tried to knock down this simplistic and dangerous way of living...God did so, in the beginning, by sending us prophets. To help us see the flaws in simplistic duality while trying to get us to enter into a world less black and white...into a world that I like to refer to as the many shades of theological and scriptural grey.

Now, before I talk about the prophet Zechariah, let me be clear. Dualities may be simplistic but they are not easy. Dualities force you to choose one over the other without giving you room to grow, to change, to learn, or simply to discern.

For example...

If you are going to live in a world of prosperity, then you most likely would live in a world where there are greater threats and dangers of people wanting to take your prosperity away so therefore you would have to have large armaments and become aggressively defensive of your territory.

Simplistic:

I have stuff and I do not want to be without my stuff. You don't have stuff and you want to have stuff. You will most likely try to take my stuff instead of living without stuff. So I need more stuff, more weapons and I will laugh and call anyone weak that says I must disarm.

Having and not having. Wanting and taking. Stockpiling weapons and disarmament.

Enter onto the scene Zechariah who starts off his oracle or prophecy:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout aloud O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo your king comes to you triumphant and victorious!"

The strength of the king of Jerusalem, the oracle of the messiah...the beautiful scripture that we know all too well from Palm Sunday...

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout aloud O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo your king comes to you triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on the back of a donkey - a colt, the foal of a donkey..."

Triumphant and victorious on the back of a baby donkey.

My duality is being challenged...because you cannot be triumphant and humble. You cannot simultaneously be victorious and choose a stubborn baby donkey as your brave and noble steed to lead the charge.

Yet, Zechariah goes on to tell us that this messiah, this person prophesied about, will not only be triumphant and victorious...but he will also cut off the chariot and the battle bows and defeat the enemies of God and reign from sea to seas commanding a peace that passes all understanding...where prisoners are set free and our hope is restored.

520 BCE is when this oracle was announced. About 500 years before Christ...Zechariah was trying to tell us that our salvation is not coming to us in the expected ways in which we order our lives...that we need to expect the unexpected messiah.

The one that can ride on the back of a donkey while also beating into the ground the forces of such great evil humbly and yet victoriously.

Who would have ever expected a man wandering the desert, eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors to humbly accept his fate to being nailed on a cross only to destroy the bonds of death, open the doors to eternal life...all while taking our sin and washing it away once and for all.

Paul struggles so very hard with this. He struggles because he understands that God and Christ are something very different than the simplistic society of black and white in which he lives.

Paul says that it is because he is riddled with sin dwelling in him that he is unable to do the good he wishes to do but the evil he wishes not to do is what he does. Even when Paul comes close to doing what is good he realizes that evil lurks around the corner for him...however, he knows the right question to ask.

He is not about to fall into the duality of saying... 'well, guess I will just be evil because good is too hard...'

No, he asks the question, who will rescue me?

If Christ died for our sins, then while yes we are captive to sin...we are not damned because of sin...Luther discovered this while reading Romans that it is simply the grace of Jesus Christ that frees us from the eternal damnation of our sinful selves...and it is up to each of us to recognize this in Christ so that we can then be free to live in this world.

Sin and death are no longer dualities in Christ. Death and life are not dualities...for in Christ in death we are reborn into new life, death not only falls out of the duality but it loses its meaning and grasp on us. Life is not just one part of who we are, but it is a gift given to us through God so we can express the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the way in which we begin to live.

We over think things far too often.

The dualities we create in 500 BCE or five minutes ago are just our way of overthinking it. Jesus prays to God that in God's attempt to reiterate what has been said by prophets Jesus points out that when we are too wise and overthink the situation we just don't get it.

We need the unexpected...we need the shades of grey...we need a triumphant humble leader...charging in on the proverbial back of a donkey but able to cut off the strongest bringers of death...we need the unexpected and mysterious gentle word of grace to prepare ourselves for what it is Jesus invites us to do.

Following God seems hard - almost impossible. Pure holy perfection, a love that we can never comprehend...and yet we, through the waters of our baptism, are required to live into this grace and to live it outloud.

Our world is weary and burdensome. People of little faith and of great faith, people just trying to survive and make it to tomorrow carry some of the heaviest burdens that our society can lay upon their shoulders.

And unexpectedly, without even realizing it, we are invited to come to Christ, to come to Jesus with our burdens, without weariness to receive rest. Respite.

To take on the yoke of Christ is to take on the yoke of love. While we might think that to be heavy and burdensome, Christ tells us that it is his yoke that easy...and his burden is light.

Take rest from a world that is trying to force you into one duality or another...take on the burden and yoke of Christ in lieu of the burden and yoke of society. One is much easier than the other.

Love is easier when we do so with Christ.