

So, shoutout of sermon inspiration this morning to the one and only Reid Jay. I gotta say, sorry bible study folks, for once all my gold star notes from our conversation Tuesday morning got beat out by...LEGOs. Yes, LEGOs and Reid's awesome description of them this week. So, if you're on Facebook you might have seen it, but the other day, Laura posted that in the midst of Reid playing with his LEGOs, he said something rather profound, he said, "We're all having a little trouble in this jail cell but we're all making it." I mean legit true for the LEGO man that Laura sent me a picture of, locked up tight in his clear blue jail cell, but also...I mean, true for us, right?

I was on a Zoom call last Sunday afternoon with Dave Delaney and a bunch of high school youth from our Synod and when we asked them how they were doing, one of them said they felt like they were under house arrest. And I mean, I think we all might say...same. It all comes in varying degrees for all of us, but I can imagine we've all had our moments, our days of this going, I feel like I locked up tight in this house, and I don't care that I have internet and cable and books and puzzles and a zillion things to keep me occupied, because it just feels like I'm having a little trouble in this confinement. And legitimately, we can generally all take a step back and say thank goodness we can still leave the house, we can go for a walk, we can breathe the fresh air, we can enjoy the spring sunshine, and those are

100% things to be overwhelmingly thankful for, but it doesn't stop us from having those moments of *ugh*, I feel entirely *stuck here* with no way out and no glimpse of hope on the horizon.

And that's where Reid's immense profoundness with his LEGOs just kind of smacked me in the face with our lessons for this week, because as I told the Bible study folks on Tuesday morning, there's just been one phrase circling over and over in my head from the lessons. This is why we got not only the gospel this morning, but the first lesson, because I just could not let it go. I could not let go of these three little words...prisoners of hope. No matter how hard I tried to get them out of my head, they just spun and spun and spun this week, and so when Reid started talking about having trouble in our jail cells but making it, I pretty much felt like the message was trying to tell me something, telling me there was something here to focus on.

We don't often get passages from the book of Zechariah. Let's be honest, most of us would probably have to consult the table of contents of our Bibles in order to find Zechariah, if we even knew such a book existed in the first place. Yet, it is from here that we get the prophecy directly calling forth Palm Sunday into Jesus' life. Zechariah is the one who proclaims that when the people of Israel's king does return, when the Davidic covenant is completed, it will be by a king unlike any other, by a

king who doesn't come in with trumpets blasting and military might, but with humility and gentleness, not upon some war horse, but upon a donkey, not just a donkey, but a *baby* donkey. The king who is coming isn't going to be who they expect and yet he will turn their entire world upside down and bring them home to where they were always meant to be.

You see, the people of Israel at the time of Zechariah's prophecy are in a little bit of a weird spot. They're caught between this weird tension of seeming like they should be able to breathe easy, but also not sure if they should. They're mired in this grey area of wanting to be optimistic, yet still cautious. It seems like they've turned a corner, and yet, life has been so bad lately that they're not sure they can trust such a thing, because they've just returned to Jerusalem from exile. Their decades upon decades of being trapped in Babylon are over, they're *home*, not only are they home, but they've been given permission to rebuild their lives, to rebuild the Temple, to start over completely new and generally on their own terms. Now, that's not to say that they're entirely in control of their own lives, no no, they're still very much under the rule of a foreign power, but the Persians were a bit more chill in how they treated their subjects. Their approach was almost entirely hands off, you do your own thing in your homeland, do whatever

makes you happy, as long as you pay us our tribute, don't try to rebel, and come when we call. So you can see where the tension comes in...

The people of Israel *want* to be happy. They're home. The Temple will once again stand as a testament to their renewed relationship with God. They've been restored. And yet...there's that lingering in the background. Can we trust this? What if we slip up again? What if the Persians change their mind? What if this all slips through our fingers? This seems like it's a good thing, but what if it's not? And that's where this little phrase sneaks in, prisoners of hope... because Zechariah is promising them something amazing. He's promising them that all of that tension they're feeling, they don't need to feel it. Their king will someday come and life is going to be good, and God has got them, held securely in God's hand. All the war that has circled around them, it will cease, and there will be peace in their land and in their hearts. They're going to be ok... Zechariah calls them to return home, return to their strength, O prisoners of hope...

It could mean so many things, to be a prisoner of hope, and I think it reflects a little bit of that grey area and tension they're feeling. On the one hand, they feel like they've been locked away from hope for so long that they feel like they can't quite get to it, fully let themselves feel it. On the other hand, now that it seems like it's here, they want to cling to it as

ardently and desperately as possible, they want to let that hope be entirely unleashed and set free. The hope they've previously clung to has felt so haphazard and not fully real, like it's only a half formed hope because it's seemed impossible, but now? Now they just want to let that hope run rampant in the world, because what they've been longing for seems like it's right in front of them. Zechariah longs to just set them free, to unchain themselves from the grey area and live into the life God has newly set before them. They've been restored, they've been redeemed, they can hope and hope and hope some more, it's not going away.

I think that's a bit where we all find ourselves not only in our current situation, but also as we stand here on the cusp of Holy Week; feeling a little bit like uncertain prisoners of hope. We so ardently want to cling to the trust that this will all be over eventually, but that hope feels a little daunting, as though it isn't fully real because we can't envision it. We feel like we're locked away from it, like we can glimpse it, but can't quite get a grip on it, and every time we feel a little bit more certain of it, it slips through our fingers and we have to start all over again. We have those moments of wanting to say, "but we're all making it!!" until the next news cycle hits and then we're back to, "we're all having a little trouble in this jail cell." Our

hope ebbs and flows and suddenly we understand a little deep what it means to be a prisoner of hope.

Holy Week carries with it the same tension. We wave our palm branches and shout hosanna, we look at Jesus and want to breathe a sigh of relief because our hope is here, our king is here. We want to live into the joy of the moment, and yet...we know what's coming. We know how this week ends, we know how quickly those shouts are going to turn from hosanna to crucify him. And even though we know what is coming next week, the pain and the grief and the why does it have to happen this way lingers in the back of our minds. It's hard to hope for resurrection when you know you have to go through the very real of pain of death to get there. We have to walk through Good Friday in order to get to Easter, and that can leave us feeling slightly chained away from our hope. Just like we want to jump to the end of this quarantine, we want to skip over Holy Week and just get to Easter.

And yet...part of hope is the journey. For the people of Israel, being told that they are unchained, free to hope and live and love again, would not have been as powerful had they not gone through the years of the exile. Easter morning wouldn't have the same sense of overwhelming joy and wonder without Good Friday, and well, honestly, I'd much rather we all had a better way of discovering the depth of hope and the wonder of how the joy

at the end of this is going to feel without having to walk through something as insanely awful as what we're in at the moment, and yet, we're here, we're on the journey, and ultimately, we will be better for it. The way we hold each other, the way we hug each other, the way we pass the peace, the way we share a cup of coffee together, will be all the more powerful on the other side of this for the journey that we have been through. When those moments come, we will be unchained and set free and the breadth of hope that will bring is going to be incomprehensible.

Today is simply one step in a journey that leads to the ultimate source of hope, today, our footsteps carry us across cloaks strewn in the road with our palm branches waving and we know, it will lead us to the foot of the cross and that will be hard and it will feel like we have been chained away from hope, but the ending is still the same, no matter what...an empty tomb, resurrection, *hope*. God will call out return to your strongholds, o prisoners of hope, return to your lives, o prisoners of hope, come out of your homes, o prisoners of hope. It may feel far off, and yet it is also as near as the Holy Spirit, because hope is something that never lets us go, it clings to us tight and reminds us that out of every darkness, out of every journey, out of even death, God bring life. My fellow prisoners of hope, we're all making it. Hope is on the horizon, resurrection shall come, no matter what. **AMEN!!!**