

If you are a sports fan of any variety, you know that there may be no more maddening phrase than, “Maybe next year...” with a definite runner up being, “This year is going to be our year.” It is the perennial phrase of hope for any sports fan, the never-flagging assumption that between this season and the next something will change that will make everything fall into place and suddenly you will go from a losing record team to champions in no time whatsoever. What makes the entire concept so frustrating is that more often than not these phrases are tossed out there by managers, GMs, execs even when they are fully aware they have not or *are* not going to do anything to change the model they have been working with which has led to nothing but losing perpetually.

As a Tigers fan, I have gone through this ad nauseum. Without fail, for easily the last two decades, the Tigers big glaring weakness has been our bullpen, our closers specifically. We could be up by six runs going into the ninth inning and let me tell you we have a bullpen that can blow that lead. And year after year, I have watched the organization bring in...new starting pitchers, new big bats, new coaches...changing everything with very little attention paid to the elephant in the room. And yet, year after year, those old phrases get put out there, next season is going to be our season, this is going to be our year, even though we have done virtually nothing different. It

happens in every sport, don't believe me, ask a Cowboys or a Bills fan how they feel at the end of a season or the start of a new one. Zero changes made, but let me tell you this is going to be our season. When you're a sports fan you quickly become intimately familiar with a particular phrase from our Zechariah text this morning. When you're constantly assured the next season will be different, with no reasons to back that statement up, you know what it means to become a prisoner of hope.

Every Palm Sunday when I read this text, that is the phrase that just grabs me and won't let my brain go. What does it mean to be a prisoner of hope? What does it mean that Israel's Savior, her coming king is calling her this? Telling her to return to their stronghold? Is it an indication that that stronghold will be a place of hope and thus it's a positive statement? Except being called a prisoner of something doesn't exactly evoke a rosy perspective on things. Yet, the king also seems to be telling Israel that he will set her free, so it seems that he is telling them that no longer will they be a prisoner of hope, but that doesn't make sense either, because isn't hope a good thing? So how can it be something holding you hostage, keeping you bound as a prisoner? And that is where my swirling thoughts around this phrase have landed me this year...because yes, hope is a good thing, and yet,

when taken in the realm of phrases like next year will be our year, or in realms of our faith...it isn't always the thing you want to be held captive to.

For the people hearing Zechariah's words of prophecy, they're in a relatively good place. He is speaking to the Israelites who have come home from Babylon, and have been given full permission by the Persian Empire to rebuild their homes, their cities, and in particular, the Temple. Things are on an upswing, and so it's not strange for the prophet to be calling them to rejoice and shout aloud. They're in a place where, for the first time in a long time, they probably feel like they *can* do that. And then Zechariah's words continue, he tells them that their king is coming, the one that they have been hoping for, the one who will restore David's throne, who will turn things fully around and declare a new era of God's reign amongst God's people. This is without a doubt a time for rejoicing! Except...

Except, well, when Zechariah goes on to describe the king who is coming, it doesn't exactly sound like a king, it sounds like a bit of a vagabond. He's coming on a donkey, and not even a full grown donkey, but a baby donkey. He isn't coming with weapons of war or strength, but is in fact coming to trample those things, snap them in two and declare peace, not only for Israel, but for the entire world. You kind of feel like the people may be having a bit of a Star Wars moment, "This is not the king you're

looking for.” For God’s people, they have that instinct to say, “This year is going to be *our* year!” but then they hear about the king that is coming to make that possible and you realize that just maybe, they’re going to remain prisoners of hope, because this was not the kind of king they were hoping for, they were looking for a king who would still go along and fit in with the status quo of the world, a king who would put them on the top and keep them safe without changing the dynamics of the world order, and what they’re getting is a peaceful king on a donkey. A lot of them probably thought, ya know, I’m going to keep hoping for what I want, not what God is offering, and when we look at it that way, it drops us smack dab into the middle of that Palm Sunday procession which is only days away from Good Friday and shouts of “Crucify!”

Despite the fact that for three years, the crowds have been hearing Jesus preach an entirely new way of connecting with one another, thinking about God’s world and their place in it, grounding themselves in love and grace, forgiveness and mercy; despite the fact that not once do they hear him say that at the end of all of this they’re going to ride in and take down the Romans, as the events of this week play out, we’re going to realize that many who are waving palm branches this morning are prisoners of hope in their hearts, hoping for the king they want, not the king they are welcoming

into town in a victorious parade. They usher Jesus into Jerusalem like royalty, royalty as described by Zechariah, on a donkey, humble of heart, and wanting to proclaim peace to all the ends of God's world. Yet, it becomes quickly evident that Jesus was serious when he indicated he was more in the business of changing the hearts and attitudes of God's people in the hopes that through them the world will change, and when that becomes clear, suddenly this isn't the king they want anymore and they rechain themselves to hope, because surely a king like they want is what they need rather than this donkey riding man in front of them.

And this is the danger of hope, isn't it? Whether it's to do with our sports allegiances, our own lives, or our own faith, sometimes we opt to stay chained to hope for *what we want* so that we don't have to actually *do* anything. That is the danger of hope, it can lead so swiftly to inaction. This our year! But we're going to field the exact same team and hope something changes! We want a Messiah! But he better not call us to help him out on his mission! We want to be God's people! But don't ask us to adjust how we function in the world or with each other! We don't realize how swiftly we turn our hope into a prison cell, boxing us in and keeping our expectations chained down to how we want God to work, rather than asking ourselves how God wants us to act and live and move in the world.

It's jarring when we realize that more often than we'd care to admit, we're continuing to hope that this year will be the year that something shifts and we get what we secretly long for. We get a Messiah who doesn't have to go through the pain and agony of Good Friday, a Messiah who doesn't make us confront the messiness of our own sin, the brokenness of our own hearts that are desperate for healing. We get eternal life without having to go through the reality of death or mortality. We get a Messiah who comes in and just cleans up the pain and sorrow of the world for us with the wave of a magic wand and doesn't place any expectations on us for how we can help aid in God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. We get a Messiah who doesn't call for us to love our neighbors *and* our enemies, who tells us that our neighbor is everyone, who doesn't call us to forgive as we have been forgiven, who allows us to stay within the boundaries of our safe, little world, not calling us out to live with and for the marginalized, the lost, the forgotten, the lonely. Each of us have corners of our hearts which remain imprisoned to that hope, hoping that maybe someday the call of faith in Christ Jesus, our Messiah and risen Lord won't place such a demand on our heart and on our life, that we can just get the easy road for once, and woefully...if we refuse to confront the reality of who Jesus is and who he came to call us to be, we will remain prisoners to that hope forever.

It feels very weird, as a pastor and as a person who owns a shirt that says, “Hope is our superpower,” to say that we have to unchain ourselves from hope. Maybe a better way to say it is that we have to unchain ourselves from the hope that Jesus will come and tell us we can remain the same, that we don’t have to change. We have to unchain ourselves from the hope that longs for a Messiah who doesn’t turn the world upside-down and ask us to come alongside him in flipping over tables and proclaiming the year of the Lord for *all* of God’s children. We have to unchain ourselves from the hope that says this is going to be the year when faith and the church makes a difference in the world, while refusing to change anything, but stay status quo. We have to unchain ourselves from the hope that has nothing to do with the Jesus who arrived with palm branches to make his way towards the cross for all of God’s children.

This week in particular, as we walk this journey with Christ, pray for a hope that will change your heart, change your path, change your expectations for yourself and others, change your view on the world. Pray for a hope made manifest in a Savior come to die for all of the world, no questions asked. Pray for a hope incarnated in a Messiah who proclaimed that God so loved the world. Pray for a hope that doesn’t come with chains or boxes, but for a hope that sets us free. **AMEN!!!**