

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

'Behold, your king is coming to you, righteous, and having salvation.'

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The prophet Zechariah calls out to the children of Israel that their God is returning to them. For this was a perplexed people. Under the rule of Cyrus the Great of Persia, they were allowed, by the will of God, to return from their exile in the land of Babylon; to be poured back once again to the land *of milk and honey*. Their punishment seems to be over; their time of chastisement has ceased. They may return to the land promised to the seed of Abraham, and to the Holy City, Jerusalem.

And yet they are perplexed. For what reason? If you were there, you would know the reason, for it would have been quite obvious to you.

You, returning from a strange land, come home, to your city, and to your God; the very God that once cast you out for your sin, for your idolatry, for your blood-letting. But the season of tribulation is over; now, it seems, is the season of peace. God declares *'return to me, my people.'* And now you return. The ax is buried. Return you now to your God; and yet when you return, you find that your God has left.

Indeed, the Lord Almighty no longer dwells in Jerusalem, upon the seat of mercy, within the majestic walls of the Temple of Zion. He has forsaken this *dwelling made with hands*, and, indeed, the Temple itself is destroyed. It is like a prisoner of war, returning to his home after the battles have long ended, only to find his house empty, his wife and children gone, and the floors covered in dust.

Why would God command us to return, if He will not be there upon our arrival?

Why should we return, if we shall not return to the Lord?

It is these questions which puzzle the Israelites, and indeed torment their hearts. Are they still under punishment? Is this but another phase of their tortures? Will it ever end? Will God ever forgive them?

Perhaps not. Perhaps they had finally gone too far. Perhaps the false gods and lies they worshiped, and the iniquities which they had committed had been enough, enough to drown the loving kindness of the Lord in the depths of their sin.

The children of Israel were lost, and without a way. Even as they return to their cities, they are still wandering, just as they had in Sinai with Moses, except at least then, God was with them. Now they wander still in the hearts, but with no God to lead them forward.

It is into this despair that the prophet speaks. Visions he sees, of horses and chariots and a golden lampstand, and then a command: Anoint a new king; build a new temple.

From this command issues this banquet of delight spoken of this morning by Zechariah: *'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!'*

For though it may seem like yet another order, to build a new temple, this is in all reality a promise, and not only a promise, but an absolution. The Lord commands the building of a new house for Him to dwell. This is because Him who would not be returned to, Himself shall now return, to dwell with His people in their midst, in His great and endless mercy, to shower them with His grace, and to defend them with His might.

'Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation.'

We who are but *little children*, are not unacquainted with such despair when faced with the darkness of our sin, for we collect petty iniquities as an amateur coin collector gathers worthless scraps of currency. Each little lie, little deception, short spell of anger, each term of bitterness, of resentment, each outburst of anger, each bout of jealousy, each political tirade or moral diatribe born of seeming holy wrath. Each, when viewed alone, seems like but a moment of everyday human weakness; but when seen together, they form a maelstrom, a

whirling abyss, of damnation, for when taken in mass, we begin to realize that our life is little more than an infinite series of vulgar misdeeds and limp-wristed evils. And indeed they are limp-wristed, for we are not brave enough to commit a true crime. We are, above all, cowards. *'Who will deliver me from this body of death?'*

Guilt *as a millstone*, throttles our neck, and not merely a feeling of guilt, but the reality of guilt, for guilty we are. We throw ourselves into a cycle of self-pity and self-vindication; all as we sink deeper still into the still emptiness of hell which slowly numbs our hearts.

But then we decide to change things; to get our life in order; to own up to the heathen ways of our past, and promise a godly future. We return to the Church, to our true and eternal home. And yet, even within this hallowed house, even within these pews of rood, conscience still mocks, for we know we are unclean, and how could this not be? We are but *little children*. Foolish, and without understanding.

You have returned to the house of the Lord. One wonders if the Lord shall ever return to you.

You doubt, *O ye of little faith*, for you trust not in the unending mercies of the Lord. But let this doubt be shattered, and all disbelief be broken, for it is written: *'Behold, your king is coming to you; humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*

Now I reveal to you what was first revealed to me by the Son of the Father. That which He first received, that you might understand, you, whom *He first loved*.

Our Lord Christ has come to reveal the grace and redemption of the Father to all, *a burden, easy and light*. And He searches both high and low, not for the man of wisdom and learning, but for the *little children, for such is God's gracious will*. *'The Lord recalls His promises.'*

'Come to me, all who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.'

'For you also, because of the blood of my covenant, will I set free from the waterless pit.' From the wilderness of this unbaptized world, into the rivers of living water which flow from the font of the baptized Church. Therefore:

'Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore you.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts:

Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:14-25; Matthew 11:25-30.