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Pentecost 6, Year A
Zechariah 9
July 9, 2023

Prisoners of Hope: Remembering God's Future

I thought we might begin today with a bit of creedal theology. Please try to contain your excitement. So why don't you go ahead and grab the Book of Common Prayer from your pews (it's the dusty red book in front of you there). There may not be enough for everyone so some of you will have to do this thing that Jesus really loves called *sharing*. I want you to turn to where we are in this service of Holy Eucharist, Rite II. It will say "Sermon" and below it "Nicene Creed." Somebody shout out the page number. You see, the Baptist Church down the road, they do Bible drills but here we do Prayer Book drills!

Yes, it's on page 358! Congratulations!

If you look at the Nicene Creed for a moment, one thing you might notice about it is that it is almost entirely made up of statements of belief about who God is now *in the present* because of what God has done *in the past*. The "present" and the "past" make up the creed, right?

"We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty...."

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God...."

"We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life...."

Those are present statements about our beliefs in who God is ... *and* the Creed also speaks of what God has done in the past:

"Through him (that is, Christ) all things were made...."

"...by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man.

"For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried."

And about the Holy Spirit, we say "He has spoken through the prophets."

But this morning, I thought we should pay special attention to those other statements in the Creed that are not about the past or the present, as much as about the future. There are not many of them, but do you see on the top of page 359, a transition happens from what God has done in

Christ in the past to what God is going to do next in Christ, *in the future*. Read that first sentence on the top of page 359. Let's say this aloud together:

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

Now we are looking ahead. Now we are talking about the future!

And what about the last sentence of the Creed? Let's read that aloud together, also:

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Fascinating! So Christians are also people who believe that Christ *will come again* and that his reign *will have no end*. And Christians are people who "...look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

Isn't that what you just said? You say this thing at least once a week, some of you more. I'm wondering, "Why does this look ahead matter?" How does this future orientation that we confess in the Creed change our lives, our world, and our church today?

Ok, so let's keep going. Let's do another Prayer Book drill, shall we? This one is harder. On what page in the Book of Common Prayer do you find the doctrine of "The Christian Hope"? I'll give you a clue. It's in the Catechism.

What page is The Christian Hope found on?

Page 861. Good job!

I'm going to ask you this question at the bottom of page 861 and I want you to answer it all together.

What is the Christian hope?

The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world.

So Christian Hope is to live today, here and now, with confidence in newness and fullness of life as we await Christ's return and the completion of God's work in the world. This is about how we live here and now because we *remember the future!*

Let me tell you a story about what it looks like for us to have this memory of the future:

There was a college professor who had long ago retired. He was known with his students as one of these professors who invited students into new perspectives through their learning together. He was able to understand where they were coming from and yet ask those questions which caused them to think deeper and better. He was an intellectual giant in his field but now he was living the retired life and he and his wife enjoyed their reading and walks and taking care of their cottage.

Occasionally former students would come to visit them. Many had gone on to do graduate and doctoral work with his encouragement. He mentored them along the way. And on one occasion, a beloved former student came to stay for a few nights. It didn't take him long to realize that his old professor wasn't just slowing down, he had become forgetful. He seemed to remember his student at first but on several occasions, he practically had to reintroduce himself. The old philosophical conversations were gone, those searching questions were only echoes now. Dementia had set in.

Of course, the student was now an adult and he was familiar with the disease of dementia. What confused him was how his professor's wife acted like everything was perfectly fine. She went about watering plants, running errands, and cooking dinner as if her husband was still entirely there, as if he could understand what she was doing or saying. She seemed totally content, even joyful at times.

When it came time for the student to leave, after much soul searching overnight, he decided that he needed to have a frank conversation with his professor's wife and her clear denial about the memory loss in her husband. He said to her, "There's no easy way to say this, but our dear scholar is losing his mind now. He clearly has dementia. I have had to repeat myself a dozen times with the same story. It seems you are in denial about what is going on or how bad it has become."

"My dear boy," she said, "it won't always be this way. We have had good days while you have been here and on my best days, I find myself living not as much in the past or denying the present reality but I find myself remembering the future. My husband will be whole again, perhaps not in this life, but God has more in store for him. This is not the end. I live as if that is real because it is."

When the prophet Zechariah wrote, as we heard in our Old Testament reading today, it was in a time of challenging transition in the life of Israel. The Hebrew people, who had been exiled to Babylon and lost everything in the process, had now returned to Judah but they were not allowed to live as they wanted to. Rebuilding was harder than they thought it would be. They still were not their own people as the mighty Persian shadow extended over them. They had been told it would be different. They had been told they would be give back their dignity, their old ways,

their temple, their very lives. It was not happening fast enough. But Zechariah reminded them of something that I would like to remind you of today. He told them that being God's people means being *prisoners of hope*.

You and me? We are prisoners of hope. As a community here, in our lives together, we are prisoners of hope.

Zechariah even tells them, as he invites them to remember God's future, that being a prisoner of hope means trusting now in God's reality even when you can't see it clearly or when things don't quite add up. He tells this warrior people who have suffered much to "rejoice greatly" because their king is coming in triumph and victory. And he also tells them – and this is hard for us to hear – that God's future is not going to look exactly like you want it to but the memory of it is in you already so you can start living it right now. This King who is coming, Zechariah says, is humble, riding on a donkey. We will come call him Son of Man, the Prince of Peace. He is the one who will break the chariots from Ephraim and cut off the war horse from Jerusalem. He is the one who will break the battle bow. He is the one who can topple the walls that we erect inside of us and around us that won't let love in. When we talk about hope, we are talking about living in God's reality now. This is the God whose Son rules in power from the cross. This is the one who beats swords into plowshares and assault rifles into pruning hooks. This is the one who says "Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest."

Because in Christian hope – and we are prisoners of it now – we have this memory of God's future, and knowing what God has in store for us tomorrow changes how we live today. Christian hope is no naivete! Sometimes your home is going to feel like a prison. Sometimes your marriage is going to implode. Sometimes your health will decline and then decline some more. Sometimes things fall apart. People get taken away from us. Chains get put on us. But don't lose hope because God's promise is that it will not be this way forever. He is the Lord of time, too. God can redeem our past and he can make his future our present. It's like people crawling to this altar to be given the first course of the heavenly banquet. It's the bread of angels we're being fed today. So remember the future – God's future – and be a prisoner of hope.

I'll tell you what. Do one more thing for me. Go back to the Book of Common Prayer. I've got one last question for you. Go back to the doctrine of Christian Hope. This time turn to the very end of the Catechism, the bottom of page 862. I'm going to ask you this question and I want you to answer it together and we'll leave it at that:

What, then, is our assurance as Christians?

Our assurance as Christians is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God which is in

Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.