

“Popular Opinion and Prophetic Vision”

The Rev. Drew Willard
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Zechariah 3:1-10

Matthew 11:16-19,25-30

[The Lord said,]

*For behold, upon the stone which I have set before Joshua, upon a single stone with seven facets,
I will engrave its inscription, says the Lord of hosts,
and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day.*

Zechariah 3:9

Let us pray... O God,
Help us recognize the precious gift you have given us of your Word
and the responsibility to share it.

Amen

Our first scripture lesson this morning is significant for its symbolism
about remembering and reconnecting with one's national heritage –
in this case, regarding the Jewish people returning from exile in Babylon.
The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe how these exiles
sought to reclaim their Israelite heritage and re-socialize themselves
now as Jews.

They rebuilt the Temple to re-consecrate it and
built a wall around Jerusalem to defend it.

They instituted their form of the Hebrew language which was influenced by Aramaic
and gathered all the people on the traditional Feast of Tabernacles
for an epic reading of the Law of Moses
to indoctrinate themselves once again.

Our 4th of July celebration is a reminder to us of our origins as a people when
Congress agreed to confirm our Declaration of Independence from England
[so, we can take some comfort Congress has ever agreed on something].

The Book of Zechariah was written around this time and it describes
eight visions the Prophet Zechariah received in a single night.

An angel accompanies him in this 4th vision which takes place in the 'divine assembly'
of heaven where 'Joshua the high priest' is about to be denounced by 'Satan'
acting as a prosecuting attorney.

However, it is the LORD, God's own self, who advocates for Joshua
and silences Satan before saying a word.

'Joshua the high priest' refers to a respected historical person
who was inspirational to those Jewish exiles who returned from Babylonian exile.
This vision honors the priestly emphasis on purity as a form of righteousness
again, symbolizing their efforts to re-constitute their nation
and re-institute Temple worship.

Willard, p.2

This particular person, Joshua, may already have been dead by that time –
so this scene envisions his judgment before God.

Considering that 'Joshua' is an older form of Jesus' name,
Christian tradition sees this as an allegory for Christ's trial and vindication.

Then another angel – an 'angel of the Lord' facilitates things in the divine assembly
by re-clothing Joshua with clean garments
and setting before him a 7 faceted 'stone'.

This is described as a precious stone that has been cut and engraved – a gemstone.

But what was engraved on it? What does it represent?

One source says this refers to a jewel that was worn by a priest
'symbolic of the removal of guilt by intercession' (Interpreters Commentary).

I have wondered what this 7 faceted stone might represent.

Here is a possible illustration for what it might mean...

This is a "gift box" with a special message...

What letters do you see? "R", "U", "C", "N", "O", "K"... Does it spell anything?

Those who know the trick, you can call it out:

"RUCNOK" – "Are you seein' OK?"

Are we seeing OK – are we seeing things as they are, or only what we want to see?

Are we stuck in our bias, our prejudice, our particular point of view?

As we are challenged to really "see" and not just get stuck "looking at",
isn't that the challenge for really healing the 'guilt' that plagues our land?

This could also be the 7 faceted stone of Zechariah's vision –

a 6 sided cube with the 7th side being the "inside" we can't see...

Isn't this a model for reality?

We all have a point of view, but we can only see so much.

We have to compare notes and reason together to get the whole picture
and figure out what the puzzle means – so that we can work together.

But we never do get the whole picture,

unless we are willing to take the time to find out what is going on with someone
on the inside – where the heart is...

Another way to represent this 7 faceted stone might be
as the Word of God itself...

At the Wild Goose Festival held in Hot Springs, NC last week, I had the opportunity
to hear many leaders of the progressive Church movement speak.

I'll say more about that experience in a minute, but one of those speakers was
Jim Wallis – the founding editor of "Sojourners Magazine".

He said that he grew up as an evangelical Christian –

and that his conservative, fundamentalist upbringing taught a certain verse
summarized the meaning and mission of the Gospel;

and that was John 3:16...

Willard, p.3

“For God so loved the world, He gave his only begotten Son
so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

It is a beautiful verse in its clarity and simplicity,

but for Jim Wallis as he grew up, he started to ask questions –

like, is being saved only about whether or not someone goes to Heaven?

What about life here and now? What about injustice?

He wasn't getting answers for his questions and for a time, he left the church;

That is until, he found an answer in Matthew 25...

“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,
thirsty and you gave me something to drink...”

When we care – or neglect the least of these, the minority in our midst,
we are doing this to Christ.

That gift of God's Word – that gemstone, inspired him on a course

of proclaiming a Gospel that applies to the street as well as the sanctuary.

In the United Church of Christ, we say:

“Don't place a period where God has placed a comma,
because God is still speaking” and that

“Whoever you are wherever you are on life's journey, you're welcome here.”

These words are not scripture themselves, but they speak truth to us

interpreting God's Word by putting its message into our own words.

It so happens that when I was at the UCC Florida Conference Fall Meeting last year,

I addressed the congregational representatives during worship

before reciting the narrative of Jesus' healing the paralyzed man; and I said,

“The world is changing to be more ‘open & affirming’ of ‘justice & peace’
just like the United Church of Christ”.

Another way of putting this is:

The UCC is ‘open & affirming’ of ‘justice & peace’.

These words are like that gemstone to me, though I would add that

the meaning and mission of the Gospel is not just about life here and now –

it must take into account our heritage of what came before

and the promise of what is to come:

So in putting this all together, the message I claim for me and proclaim to you, is that:

The United Church of Christ is ‘open & affirming’ of ‘justice & peace’

for the sake of all God's people, as a beloved community through Christ
on Earth as it is in Heaven.

That is not the popular message of evangelical Christianity

which would be content with a message of conformity,

keeping one's faith – and God, “in a box”, so to speak.

It is a superficial worldview that would welcome apocalyptic social breakdown

as inevitable with the smug confidence of being saved.

To question that perspective is to invite disapproval and rejection.

Willard, p.4

[Jesus said,]

“But to what shall I compare this generation?

*It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates,
‘We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’*

Matt. 11:16-17

Nanny, nanny, boo-boo!

I don't even think you would have to speak English to know what that means.
It is that infantile disappointment when someone refuses to conform
to the herd mentality of popular opinion.

It can be tough to be yourself,
especially when others don't quite get what you are about.

So, what are you about? What do you believe?

What is that 7 faceted stone that represents your truth?

I just got back from an event that truly lives out our UCC values
that no matter who you are, you are welcome as yourself –
someone actually said that to me!

The Wild Goose festival took place over four days in the beautiful mountains
of Hot Springs, NC just outside of Asheville.

About a thousand people attended and most camped in tents,
though cabins were available, and houses could be rented –
if you reserved them far enough in advance!

If I got a flush toilet and a shower, I'm happy enough to camp.

Everybody was there – little children, teens, young adults, families, seniors;
“Carnival de Resistance” looking like characters from “Cirque de Soleil”,
Catholic, Episcopalians, 7th Day Adventists, even Jewish folks were there;
I camped next to some Disciples of Christ (the denomination!)
and they adopted me into their ‘tribe’ –

yet I met only one person from the UCC and he was working for the DOC.
There were booths, tents, art workshops, lectures, panel discussions,
musical performances, even “Beer Hymns”,
as well as preaching, praying, and communion.

I did finger painting with Roger Hutchison who did art therapy
for the children of Newtown and heard about Koinonia Farm in Georgia
where Habitat For Humanity began.

I heard Jim Wallis, Brian McLaren, Frankie Schaeffer – whose father wrote
The Christian Manifesto challenging Christianity to compete
' in the marketplace of ideas', and Franklin Schaefer
who was defrocked from the Methodist Church (and since reinstated)
for officiating a gay wedding, as well as William Barber
who leads a Moral Monday protest at the capitol of North Carolina
to protest political injustices, even despite death threats.

Willard, p.5

One of the great experiences is the simple serendipity of meeting people
of all walks of life who nevertheless were of the same mind, the same Spirit.

I met a man named Paul who does international outreach
similar to Church World Service – except they ask impoverished people
what help they need beyond necessities of food, shelter, clothing,
to help them in entrepreneurial projects to lift themselves out of poverty.

While talking with Paul, a friend of his came up and
asked if I'd like to go to lunch with them –
then I saw Brian McLaren standing there, too!

I had lunch and talked with Brian McLaren – one of the most dynamic voices
for progressive Christianity in our time. Amazing!

There was so much that happened – and much ahead that will unfold
as we set ourselves to do the task of doing Church
throughout the week and not just on Sunday,
on the street as well as the sanctuary!

Amen

Our lesson today comes from Zechariah 3:1-10 and describes the 4th of eight visions, in which a high priest of Israel named Joshua stands in the midst of the divine assembly, awaiting judgment...

- 3:1 Then [the angel] showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him.
- 2 And the Lord said to Satan,
“The Lord [the One Who Is God] rebuke you, O Satan!
The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you!
Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?”
- 3 Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments.
- 4 And the angel said to those who were standing before him,
“Remove the filthy garments from him.”
- And to [Joshua] he said,
“Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you,
and I will clothe you with rich apparel.”
- 5 And I said,
“Let them put a clean turban on his head.”
- So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments;
and the angel of the Lord was standing by.
- 6 And the angel of the Lord [instructed] Joshua,
- 7 “Thus says the Lord of hosts:
If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge,
then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts,
and I will give you the right of access
among those who are standing here.
- 8 Hear now, O Joshua the high priest,
you and your friends who sit before you,
for they are [people] of good omen:
behold, I will bring my servant the Branch.
- 9 For behold, upon the stone which I have set before Joshua,
upon a single stone with seven facets,
I will engrave its inscription, says the Lord of hosts,
and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day.
- 10 In that day, says the Lord of hosts,
every one of you will invite his neighbor
under his vine and under his fig tree.”

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

Matthew 11:16-19,25-30

[Jesus said,]

16 “But to what shall I compare this generation?

It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates,

17 ‘We piped to you, and you did not dance;

we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say,

‘He has a demon’;

19 the Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say,

‘Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’

Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

25 At that time Jesus declared,

“I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,

that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding

and revealed them to babes;

26 yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will.

27 All things have been delivered to me by my Father;

and no one knows the Son except the Father,

and no one knows the Father except the Son

and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden,

and I will give you rest.

29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;

for I am gentle and lowly in heart,

and you will find rest for your souls.

30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”