

Zechariah 9: 9-12  
Psalm 145: 12-21  
Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

Prisoners of Hope  
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Here is a Sufi story: a seeker arrives at a monastery in search of a spiritual guide. He finds an old sage and says, "People say that you have found wisdom. Is this true?"

"You could say so," says the holy sage.

"But what makes one wise?"

"Wisdom is the ability to recognize."

"I know that. But the question is, to recognize what?"

"Spiritual wisdom is the ability to recognize the butterfly in the caterpillar, the eagle in the egg, and the saint in the sinner." Recognition is Wisdom.

Back in 2007, The Washington Post arranged an experiment. They asked the virtuoso violinist Joshua Bell to play for 45 minutes in a Washington Metro station during rush hour. They wanted to observe the reactions of passersby to the sound of 6 exquisite classical pieces played on a Stradivari violin. The performer was someone whose concert performances could command \$100 a seat prices, so his pay averaged out to about \$1000 per minute. But he was dressed in a nondescript manner and opened his violin case in front of him, like any street musician. And a video camera was hidden to record the scene. The acoustics in the subway station were great, by the way.

Guess how much money he made in 45 minutes? \$32.17. Yes, people put **pennies** in the case. More remarkable was watching almost 1,100 people walk by at high speed, on their way to work. Almost no one paused, even those who threw in their change. One woman was walking with her three year old, obviously needing to drop him off at preschool so that she could get to work. You can see the child leaning back on his mother's hand, trying to linger and listen to and see the musician. Then you see the mother deftly get between the child and the fascinating sights and sounds and just motor him out of there. All those people, so captivated by their own needs and worries and tasks that they couldn't hear the beauty. I think of this story when I read Jesus' words: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Maybe that toddler was the only wise person in the station, the only truly free person, because he could hear the music, and recognize something special.

In this last week, freedom and independence were celebrated. But it is good to consider what holds us captive. I think that even though we hold up freedom and independence as an ideal, absolute freedom is not possible or even desirable. We wear a yoke, so to speak, even if it is the relatively tolerable yoke of community responsibility, family ties, or personal values.

Our Hebrew ancestors saw themselves in a relationship of radical dependence on one God: a God who seemed to intervene in their history, and who inspired a single-minded devotion. Even when they were literally captive to foreign powers, they saw themselves as bound to serve God first and foremost.

When Zechariah speaks to the captives returning from Babylon, he calls them “prisoners of hope.” I like that phrase. I would rather be a prisoner of hope than a prisoner to many other powers in our culture.

In Jesus’ time, the burdens of the people were heavy. There was the burden of a foreign occupying power. There was the burden of taxation. There were the burdens of both Roman law and Jewish law. Theoretically, laws were meant to be about clarifying human conduct, making society run more smoothly. But this was not the experience of the common person. The laws of religion could oppress as much as any dictator. Jesus does not speak against the spirit of the Torah, which he finds to be a deep well of ethical teaching. But he does speak against using it purely for judgment and limitation.

Jews were known to speak of “the yoke of the Torah.” The Rabbis said, “Whoever accepts upon himself the yoke of the Torah – the yoke of subjugation and the yoke of labor will be removed from him.” This is actually very similar to Jesus’ teaching. Jesus uses the “yoke” as a metaphor for discipleship. We think of oxen, and a hard, heavy burden. Like the Rabbis, Jesus turns this idea on its head. The yoke is easy and the burden is light. The scholar David Holwerda writes: “a yoke both restrains and enables making it simultaneously a burden and a possibility.” So how can we understand this yoke, not of Torah, but of discipleship? What does it enable and what does it inhibit? Where is our allegiance, where is our freedom? Where is our hope?

The burdens of our time are different. We live in a democratic country. We may feel burdened by taxes, but there is some sense that the taxation process is transparent. We have freedom of religion, and can choose which set of religious rules we feel we must obey. We are offered a huge smorgasbord of spiritual practices, and may even cross comfortably between religions at times. But still we run to Jesus’ words, because we still seek rest for our souls. If we are going to wear a yoke, let it be the easy one, the hopeful one that leads to rest and fulfillment. If we must give our allegiance to something or someone, let it be worthy of our devotion.

When Jesus says, “take my yoke upon you,” I don’t think that he is the farmer or the driver of the oxen. I think he is our partner in the yoke. I have heard that older, more experienced oxen were paired with the younger ones in the yoke so that they could learn how to work. Learn how to be gentle and humble of heart, says our partner. That is the way to peace. Jesus does not offer freedom from work, but freedom from onerous, purposeless labor, driven by fear or compulsion. We are offered another kind of work, shared, purposeful, holy, and satisfying.

The prisoner of hope is not independent: he or she lives in interdependence. Being joined together means that even when one of us is struggling with despair, another can offer a word or a gesture that will sustain them. When one of us sees only a caterpillar, the other can remember the butterfly soon to emerge. When one of us cannot hear the music, another can stop and call attention to it.

Our ancestors in faith responded to God with worship, blessing God and receiving blessing in return. And throughout history, our spiritual ancestors have done as we still do: we bless God and try to **be** a blessing to our neighbors and the created world. We understand worship to of God to require this of us. From the time of Zechariah, with his “prisoners of hope,” through the time of Jesus, with his “easy yoke,” through the founding of this country, people have been moved by this same sense of need, love and yearning toward their creator.

We approach the worship of our God with need, with a kind of hunger. We also approach it with joy and hope. Here, in this place, we find ourselves joining in a larger song, a larger purpose. When we are weary, we can turn to the one who offers rest. When we feel burdened, we can share the load with the gentle one who understands the weight. And through it all, we learn. Our eyes open to beauty. Our ears hear the music. We slow down. We recognize the gift.

Amen.