

Dignity / New York
Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 19, 2016

Remembering the Dreams of Zechariah in the Aftermath of Orlando
Prepared by Danny Larkin in consultation with the Homiletics Group

We've learned more about the carnage at the pulse nightclub since we met last week.

A drag queen and other club kids told saw the shooter regularly at the Pulse

Other men disclosed that the shooter contacted them on Jack'd and other apps.

The FBI opened an investigation to explore if conflicted sexuality and homophobia was a motive for the shooting.

The final death toll - 49 people lost their lives and 53 were wounded - makes it the most deadly known hate crime towards queer people in American history.

And we are all left asking...

Why?

Why did he become so violent?

Why did he attack the queer community in which he participated incognito?

Why did he abuse the free will God gave him?

Why did God let this happen?

We've all been pondering these questions

So, I want to acknowledge them openly.

My friends, these are not new questions.

Our ancestors asked them too.

Questions like this are as old as the Old Testament, as old as tonight's reading from Zechariah.

Do you know about Zechariah?

Zechariah is not the most well known prophet from the Old Testament.

And you would certainly be forgiven if you didn't recognize his name, or know much about him.

But he was well known to Jesus of Nazareth

And the gospels are rich with references to Zechariah.

Why wouldn't we know so much about this prophet if Jesus and his first followers pondered him so much?

It's because Zechariah hails from one of the most difficult periods of Jewish history.

Just as we tend to gloss over low points in our own stories, harder moments in history get glossed over too.

But Zechariah had good news for traumatized people.

And the earliest Christians, bearing many trials and tribulations like us now, found a special inspiration in Zechariah.

Join me in one of our oldest traditions.

Come reflect with me on Zechariah's Visions

First, let me set the stage for the prophet's ministry

In 587BC, the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem.

Many people starved to death during the siege.

After the invaders breached the wall of the city,, they wrecked many of its buildings, raped and murdered many of the Israelites, and burnt the temple of Solomon to the ground.

After the dust settled, a small band of Jewish survivors were sent away into exile.

50 years later, a tolerant emperor came to power. He invited the descendants of the Jewish survivors to return to Jerusalem and rebuild.

How do you move on and rebuild after mass murder? That's what Zechariah was up against.

It was in this time of mourning that Zechariah preached hope.

The name Zechariah translates to God remembers, and his message was that God has not forgotten you.

Zechariah inspired this small band of survivors to rebuild by sharing visions of a brighter future. And the scroll he left us unfolds like a series of dreams.

Zechariah reminded the Jewish people that their new temple would soon be standing, the presence of God would be more fully felt, that morale would rebound, and that soon they would reap a rich harvest.

After trauma, it's hard to feel god's spirit. And Zechariah wanted everyone to feel god's grace again.

In our first reading tonight, Zechariah shared his vision of an oppressed person finding grace.

"Upon the one who had been pierced, there will be a spirit of grace poured out"

Zechariah wanted us to know that when we feel pierced and beat down, there was a spirit of grace from God to renew us.

He wanted us to know - we have the Holy Spirit.

Even in this time when our community feels pierced by this mass shooting - we still have the Holy Spirit.

I don't want to reduce Zechariah to the it's gets better prophet.

Because Zechariah was trying to teach us about the paradox of god's power.

God can't control human beings. They have free will.

But that does not make God weak.

Zechariah believes that if you invite god in you can experience extraordinary grace that will work in our hearts, and release so much pain and sorrow.

That paradox is the heart of Zechariah.

Not so much that it gets better. But that there is grace and love to help us handle the tribulations that God can't stop because of free will.

Zechariah was on the minds of the writers of the gospels. The gospel of John specifically references this piercing passage when Jesus was on the cross.

In 2008, the theologian Walter de Gruyer published a book demonstrating several echoes of Zechariah in the Gospel of Matthew.

The writers of the Gospels saw Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the prophecies Zechariah. But because we are not well versed in this mystic book we miss many of these allusions.

But how can we feel grace after a week like this?

In today's gospel from Luke, Jesus answers that question.

The apostles ask Jesus what he wants to be called.

He tells them to stop calling him fancy or majestic names.

And instead, Jesus tells them to pick up the cross if they want to follow him.

Now this was a provocative metaphor.

We are so familiar with crosses that sometimes we can't appreciate its radicality anymore.

Imagine Jesus saying sit on an electric chair, if you want to follow me.

That's a bit jarring isn't it?

There's a bit of word play here.

Jesus hadn't yet been crucified on the cross but Luke is hinting to readers that Jesus already knows what's ahead. He is - after all - fully human and fully divine.

But Jesus isn't discouraged even though he knows he going to be pierced, just like in Zechariah. He feels the spirit of grace poured out from God.

Jesus invites all of us to feel this spirit of grace, which is so powerful that you don't need to be scared of bearing crosses anymore.

Jesus wants to end our fears

Jesus wants to end our discouragement.

Jesus wants to end our hopelessness.

Jesus wants to end our bitterness .

Jesus wants us to feel the spirit of grace.

Even though, we like him, bear the cross.

This is paradox of Zechariah. This is the paradox of Jesus Christ.

There's a story about the book of Zechariah from Rome's early Christian community in the 4th century.

St. Jerome and St. Paula were busy compiling, translating, and interpreting the many texts we now recognize as the bible.

But one book from the Old Testament gave them pause.

A book of dreams caused them to realize they didn't have all the answers.

Are you surprised it was Zechariah?

The joke goes that it was the only time St. Jerome admitted he didn't know something.

And Zechariah humbles all of his with this paradox - God exists as a spirit of grace despite how dysfunctional people can pierce us.

And so in 386 AD, 900 years after this prophet lived, and over 300 years after Jesus died and was raised up, St. Jerome and St. Paula left Rome to get answers about Zechariah. They traveled all the way to Alexandria to confer with the learned St Didymus the Blind. This blind sage knew things they didn't.

Although St. Didymus was blinded at a young age, this scholar felt the spirit of grace, lived out Jesus's lessons.

St. Didymus the Blind felt the spirit too strongly to wallow in what he couldn't see, to despair in what he could not do.

He did what he could.

He set out to learn with his ears - his assistants read many books to him

Despite his blindness, he became legendary for his encyclopedic memory, his mastery of dialectics, and for his profound insights into scripture.

St. Jerome and St. Paula knew his insights were worth a trip to Egypt.

Oh to have been a fly on the wall at their meeting in Alexandria. What this blind sage said about Zechariah must have blown his guests away. For they asked him to write it down. And St. Jerome was not easily impressed.

So, St. Didymus the Blind wrote and bound a special commentary on Zechariah. He later sent it to St. Jerome and St. Paula in Rome. It is was then copied widely and revered by many theologians.

It took a blind man to understand Zechariah's visions and dreams.

It took a blind man to understand that God's grace is stronger than any pierce from an oppressor, and stronger than any injury.

It took a blind man to understand that even though humans inflict traumas on each other, God's grace can relieve our pain and renew our resolve to rebuild.

Most of St. Didymus the Blind's texts are lost, and the Zechariah's commentary did not survive into modern times.

In 1941, the improbable happened. After centuries of being lost, a copy was unearthed in Tura just outside Cairo.

At the the height of fascism, God sent a sign that an old voice could teach us something new about how to bear unfathomable violence.

I don't think there's an answer to the question of evil.

The mystical point from Zechariah is that no matter what happens, or what terrible things humans do with their free will, God's spirit of grace is always there to soothe us, console us and to lift us back up.

As we draw towards the Eucharist, let us release ourselves from the burden of intellectualizing about irresolvable paradoxes.

Let us invite in this spirit of grace to heal our pierced feelings.

Let us invite this spirit of grace to soothe our sorrows, to relieve our rage, and to bless our bleeding hearts....

Come, Spirit of grace that Zechariah foretold....

Come spirit of God...

Come spirit of Jesus...

Come Holy Spirit...fill the hearts of your weary people...heal us... and enkindle in us the fire of your love.