



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon on the Old Testament Lesson for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

### Zechariah 7 & 8

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Comparing ourselves to others is something we all do. It's something we have to do to some extent just to know if we're doing what we're supposed to or accomplishing our goals. But as much as it's essential some times, we also have to be careful. There are some times that we compare ourselves to others with the wrong motive and we really get ourselves into trouble when play the "spiritual comparison" game. How often do you think things like: "I go to church every Sunday. I'm a lot better than my neighbour who isn't even a Christian," or maybe you start comparing your "good works" with those of your brothers and sisters. That's dangerous territory to get into. When we start making those sorts of comparisons, what's at the heart of it first is pride, but secondly we're forgetting that God doesn't love us or save us because of our works—not one of us can be good enough to earn God's favour. Our works are an outgrowth of our faith and we only have our faith by the grace of God—aside from his grace we would stand condemned before him just like anyone else.

The Jews had this problem and it was something that Zechariah addressed. They were focused on their good works. God was focused on their hearts. Look at chapter 7:1-6.

**In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah in the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev. Now the people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech and their men, to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to ask the priests of the house of the LORD of hosts and the prophets, "Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?" Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me; "Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? And when you eat and when you drink, do you**

### not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? (7:1-6)

Fasting is something that wasn't overly common as a religious practice in the time before the Babylonian Exile, but after the Jews found themselves in Babylon, and especially after their return to Judah, fasting became much more common. I think the reason for this is that when they were exiled they finally remembered all of God's calls to them to repent and turn to him. They realised that they were under his judgement and were being punished for their sins—so they fell on God's grace and mercy and turned back to him. That was wonderful. The problem was that like so many of the things we do as part of our religious life, that fasting ended up becoming a way for some people to feel superior to others—to show off their spirituality. This delegation that came to the Temple to ask about their fasting probably was involved in just this sort of thing.

Ash Wednesday isn't a big part of our culture in British Columbia, but if you've been to a place where it is a big deal, think about all the people you see going around all day with ashes smudged on their foreheads as if having gone to church that morning was something to be proud of. The ashes are supposed to be a sign of humility, but for many they've become something to take pride in—to say, "I'm more spiritual than you." That's the idea here. And God responds to the people through Zechariah with a simple question: "When you fast, are you fasting for me or for you?" He also addresses what is probably a case of legalism on their part. They ask about a particular fast that was common in the fifth month, but God responds and asks them about *all* their fasts, not just that one. The real heart of the matter is what their motives and attitudes were. A fast was supposed to be an outward sign of their inner humility. It was supposed to be their way of saying "I'm sorry" to God—a way of demonstrating that they're turning back to him. Instead it turned into a way for them to outdo or show up each other.

Zechariah reminds them of what led to their current situation. Look at verses 7-14:

**When Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, with her cities round about her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited, were not these the words which the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets?"**

He's reminding them of the time before the Exile, when times were good and the people should have been grateful to God for

everything and should have been following the ways he had revealed to them.

**And the word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in your heart."**

That's what God called them to do—to show truth, justice, compassion, and loving-kindness—to demonstrate with their works and actions that their hearts were infused with God's grace. Instead they did the opposite. This was one of the primary messages of the prophets: God's call to live holy lives—to reflect his holy character; to treat other people as God would treat them; and to be a light shining on a hill, a light showing God to the pagan nations around them, but they didn't do that.

God knew what was in their hearts. Remember St. James' proclamation that "faith without works is dead"? That's what Zechariah is getting at here. These were people who loudly declared their faith, but didn't show any evidence of it

**But they refused to hearken, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears that they might not hear. They made their hearts like adamant lest they should hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts. "As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear," says the LORD of hosts, "and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations which they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate."**

No matter what happened, the people ignored God. So to get their attention he raised up the Babylonians, who came and wiped out their land and took them away in captivity to Babylon—a city that was itself a symbol for everything that was evil in their time.

Isaiah called to the people in much the same way. In Isaiah 55:6-7 we read his call:

**Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have**

## **mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.**

God called and called and called to his people to turn back to him, but they wouldn't listen. Isaiah tried to remind the people to turn back and receive God's mercy and pardon while they still had a chance to do so—because he knew, like we should, that eventually there comes a time when our patient God says that enough is enough and our punishment comes.

Zechariah is reminding this delegation that came to ask about fasting of all this. Imagine how exasperating this must have been for him. He's been preaching about how the Jews got to where they were. Their fathers had rejected God time after time and had eventually seen God's punishment. They were removed from their home and were made desolate and that's what finally woke them up. So their fathers turned back to God, and now a generation or so later, this group of religious show-offs arrives to ask legalistic questions about their fasting practices—they're doing exactly what led their fathers into exile. Zechariah had to be throwing his hands in the air at this point. Talk about thick-headed people!

First Zechariah reminds these people of where they had come from, then he reminds them of where God promises they're going. To see the direct response to the question of fasting we have to jump to the end of Chapter 8. Look at verses 18 and 19:

**And the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love truth and peace.**

What I see here is God sort of saying to these people, "Guys, knock yourself out on the fasting, because it's not going to be very long before the time for fasting is over." Think about it. God was wanting these people to look to the coming Messiah. Everything they'd been taught—their scriptures, their worship, their Temple, everything—was designed by God to point to the coming Messiah. And they just weren't seeing it. And what happened when the Messiah came? They still didn't see it and went on with their false piety and their legalism, totally oblivious to Jesus. God calls them here to be joyful, glad, and cheerful and to love truth and peace. Instead they took pride in their very pious show of

dourness and fasting (it's easy to be happy and joyful all the time, but to them that wasn't very spiritual—they were doing the hard work of looking grim and sorrowful). And where were their works? They weren't showing love and truth—they were showing pride and arrogance.

But even when God's chosen people are wrapped up in their own pride and selfishness, God will still do his work. He'll still do what he promised. If his own people won't turn to him, God will see that other people will. Look at verses 20-21:

**"Thus says the LORD of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities; the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts; I am going.'**

God hints at the fact that it won't be long before he starts looking outside of Judah to do his work. Here he's talking about people coming from the outside to come to Jerusalem and to the Temple. God's own chosen people are off doing their own thing and ignoring God while foreigners start showing up to worship him and to the work that they should have been doing. But God will still work through is people. There's a hint here that God will so bless his people that the rest of the world won't be able to help taking notice. That was the mission of the Jews. God called them to be his people—to follow his way and to be so blessed that they would draw everyone else to God. Look at the last two verses:

**Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"**

I love the imagery here of the gentiles grabbing hold of the Jews and wanting to go where they go so that they can be a part of their blessing.

Christ gives us the same mission. As Christians we should have people following us around and wanting to be a part of what we're a part of. People should be seeing God at work in our lives and wanting to get in on it. In my experience that doesn't seem to be what happens most of the time. More often than not, what they see in us is a bunch of dour and self-righteous men and women who pride ourselves on our good works

while we turn our backs on everyone else. How often do we talk about God's love, but spew hatred and prejudice with our actions, or at least give the wrong impression?

Consider how Jesus dealt with sin. He approached unbelieving sinners with a heart of love and compassion. His message was one of God's grace and mercy—grace and mercy that draw the sinner to him and through him bring transformation. It wasn't the come as you are and stay as you are message of some today—but it was a loving message of come as you are and be *renewed*. The problem that seems to be present in the church is that we look at unbelieving sinners and somehow expect them to be other than they are without first receiving God's grace. We get angry—and don't get me wrong, there are places for righteous anger—and we confront sin, but we do it as if we're somehow better than them—as if we're not sinners ourselves. Only Jesus could make that claim. We're like the Jews who prided themselves on their fasting and pious acts. We compare ourselves to the unsaved and get to feeling pretty good about ourselves. We start to become self-righteous and we forget that there isn't a single bit of righteousness in us that isn't Christ's righteousness. When we live our lives like that it's no wonder that we push people away instead of drawing them to us.

We're as much a part of God's promise through Zechariah as the Jews were. We need to be living in the grace of God. We need to be reliant on his grace every moment of every day—and we need to be aware of our reliance on his grace. We need to understand that we live only because of that grace and not because of anything we've done. If that's where our hearts are we will be living examples of God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. That's the point when we become contagious Christians. That's when people will be following us around and wanting a part of what we have—wanting to find new life in Christ.