

## A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered Down

Tuesday, January 19, 2021

# Daring to be Happy

*As you have been an object of cursing among the nations, O Judah and Israel, so will I save you, and you will be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong. —Zechariah 8:13*

The vaccine is finally making its way through our communities! You probably know a few folks who have already received their inoculations, and perhaps you are one of them. Not only have prayers been answered for the speedy development of a vaccine, but we are looking at an astoundingly high effectiveness of over 95%. Now I am hearing of health care system workers receiving shots. Next shall be those in nursing homes and retirement communities, and then our seniors will be in line for their blessing. This is reason for celebration!

So why so little celebration? The gloom seems to pervade in spite of much reason for gladness. One need not look far to find reasons for concern. Our nation is in a political disaster. The number of COVID infections is still quite high, and many are suspicious of a vaccine which was put together in such a hurry. Is it safe? Is it truly effective? It may take a while for most of us to get back into happy mode.

My daily readings have been taking me through the post-exilic prophets and it has been most interesting to find the similarity which our present day bears to those days of Israel's re-establishment after the Babylonian captivity. God's people were in a funk. They remembered too well the losses suffered in the destruction of Jerusalem and the many years of exiled captivity. Now the captivity was over and they had returned to the Holy Land. In a surprisingly brief period of time the Temple was rebuilt and the priesthood was re-established. At a glimpse, one would expect that hope had been renewed and that Israel was back on their merry way. We also know that this rebuilt Jerusalem and Temple would welcome the Messiah! We see reasons for hope and gladness, but the returned exiles saw it very differently. Like those returned refugees, we are keenly aware of those who have been lost to the virus. We have lived a full year of ongoing anxiety as we have tried to safely navigate around the virus. We have experienced an endless litany of scolds and warnings from the expert class. Now good news is on the horizon, and joy is not coming to us easily.

The prophets of God had to do a fair amount of cheerleading in those days. Haggai and Zechariah needed to let God's people know that they could and would rebuild the Temple, even in the face of a hostile neighborhood. Ezra and Nehemiah came to guide this restarting nation as they rebuilt walls and re-established themselves in the Law. Malachi needed to make it clear that the Messiah was coming and that God loved them dearly. The guilt over the exile had stayed with Israel, but now the time of God's favor had returned. Would they be able to grasp this promise and to begin living as God's joyful children? And dare they believe that the best was yet to come? It was an uphill climb.

So here we are, on the verge of the end of this terrible plague. Dare we have hope? Dare we rejoice in all that is happening? We have become quite accustomed to worrying and the media has been relentless in its gloom. Many of our leaders have also learned that it is much easier to worry than to cast a vision of hope. And who wants to risk speaking a word of hope that may not come true in its predicted time? We all know that the optimistic ones and the ones who dare to be joyful can easily be written off as mental lightweights, while long faces spouting dire warnings are generally recognized as the smart ones.

Dare we be glad in these days? Shall we find the gumption to hope? Can we hear with our ears and spirits the word of God spoken through prophet: *Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong*. At this moment the rates of infection are still at a high, concerning level, and we have not yet turned the corner. The time has not quite come to get back to life as we knew it, but that time will soon be here. Are we ready? Dare we be happy?

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

*O Lord, in whom is our hope, remove far from us, we pray thee, empty hopes and presumptuous confidence. Make our hearts so right with thy most holy and loving heart, that hoping in thee we may do good; until that day when faith and hope shall be abolished by sight and possession, and love shall be all in all.* —Christina Rossetti, 1830-94