

THE MINOR PROPHETS – THIS IS OUR GOD

A Second Chance God

We live between the dreaming and the coming true. We live in the world as it is, not in the world as we would like it to be. As followers of God we put our hope in Him, but sometimes its hard to see or know when God is present. Sometimes, perhaps, it seems and feels like, God has, in fact, forgotten about us. Perhaps sometimes we are left wondering: where is God?

Perhaps at one time we had hopes and dreams, but, now we're not so sure. We live between the dreaming and the coming true..... and that can be a hard place to be. A place where things have not gone as we hoped or expected. A place where God seems absent. A place where its all gone horribly wrong.

At the 1999 British Open Golf Championship, French golfer Jan van de Velde stood on the tee of the last hole with a 7-shot lead. In professional golf a 7-shot lead is almost unheard of. He is about to play the final hole on the final round of one of the major golf tournaments, and he has an unassailable lead. All he has to do is score 6 or less on this hole to win the title.

The final hole is a par 4 – which means a golfer of his ability will score 4 – or less! He only needs to score 6 to win – easy! But it all went horribly wrong. He hit a wayward drive off the tee – using his driver against the advice of his Caddy. His second shot hit the greenside stand to land in deep rough, his third shot, much to the anguish of the crowd, landed in the stream that ran across the hole.

To the stunned amazement of the crowd, Van de Velde looked like he was going to try to hit his ball out of the water... he even took off his shoes and socks and waded into the stream ready to play. But, by the time he'd done that, his ball was completely underwater because the stream was tidal, and the tide was coming in.

His fourth shot then was a penalty drop, he hit his fifth shot into the bunker, then he chipped out of the bunker and holed his putt to finish with a seven. All he had to do was score six. To be seven shots clear on the last hole meant he'd been playing remarkably well.

But he scored seven. Jean van de Velde lost the playoff. Standing on the 18th tee, everything was looking good – just six or less to win, but then it all went so horribly wrong.

The prophet Zechariah begins writing at the same time as Haggai is writing. Zechariah writes a lot more than Haggai, and over a much longer period of time. Zechariah and Haggai were writing to the same people in the same circumstances.

Last week Seidal reminded us that the people of Judah had been allowed by King Cyrus to return from exile to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. They had got busy building their own houses, and they had pretty much forgotten about the temple. They had started the rebuilding, but they had faced opposition and they had become discouraged. Haggai had encouraged the people to rebuild the temple and challenged them about their priorities.

But here's the thing, God is not just interested in the temple. It's not that in the life of the people of Judah and Israel the temple wasn't important – it was. The temple had been, and was, the centre of their life – the place they came to remember God and that they were his people. Rebuilding the temple is important for the people – it will help them remember that they are still God's people.

But, but, God is not really interested in the building, the building is not what is most important to God, it never has been and it never will be. God is much more concerned about the people. God's heart is for the people. God's heart is for the people not for the building.

The people are feeling forgotten by God. They have suffered in exile in Babylon for decades. They have, some of them. Returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. They have faced opposition and it's all gone horribly wrong, and where is God? Through Zechariah, God speaks from his heart, to the hearts of his people.

1 In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo:

² “The LORD was very angry with your ancestors. ³ Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Return to me,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the LORD Almighty. ⁴ Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed:

This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices.' But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the LORD. ⁵ Where are your ancestors now? And the prophets, do they live forever? ⁶ But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your ancestors?

"Then they repented and said, 'The LORD Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do.'
(Zechariah 1 v 1-6)

Perhaps another way to say what God is saying through Zechariah is simply this: 'Come back, it's better that way!' God reminds the people how they got to where they are now. The people generally had lived without reference to God, they were not living in the way God had invited them to live. God had kept on and on, saying through the prophets that if they carried on in the way they were, it would not go well. He kept trying, through his prophets, to point out that nothing was really changing, and in the end, God has said: "Ok, have it your way!"

Both Israel and Judah had been taken into exile and the nations of Israel and Judah had ended. They had no land of their own and no king on the throne. God, through Zachariah, tells the people in Jerusalem that he hasn't forgotten any of that, and that his offer is still on the table.

Come back, it's better that way.

Does anybody know what the name Zechariah means? It means 'God remembers,' don't you love that? God uses a man whose name means God remembers to tell the people God remembers! Friends, could it be that He wants you to hear that today, right now, in these moments?

PEARLS

The cheerful girl with bouncy golden curls was almost five. With her mother at the checkout stand, she saw them: a circle of glistening white pearls in a pink foil box. "Oh please, Mummy. Can I have them? Please, Mummy, please!"

Quickly the mother checked the back of the little foil box and then looked back into the pleading blue eyes of her little girl's upturned face. "A dollar ninety-five. That's almost \$ 2.00. If you really want them, I'll think of some extra chores for you and in no time, you can save enough money to buy them for

yourself. Your birthday's only a week away and you might get another crisp dollar bill from Grandma."

As soon as Jenny got home, she emptied her penny bank and counted out 17 pennies. After dinner, she did more than her share of chores and she went to the neighbour and asked Mrs Mc James if she could pick dandelions for ten cents. On her birthday, Grandma did give her another new dollar bill and at last she had enough money to buy the necklace.

Jenny loved her pearls. They made her feel dressed up and grown up. She wore them everywhere – Sunday school, kindergarten, even to bed. The only time she took them off was when she went swimming or had a bubble bath. Mother said if they got wet, they might turn her neck green.

Jenny had a very loving daddy and every night when she was ready for bed, he would stop whatever he was doing and come upstairs to read her a story. One night when he finished the story, he asked Jenny, "Do you love me?"

"Oh yes, Daddy. You know that I love you."

"Then give me your pearls."

"Oh Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have Princess – the white horse from my collection. The one with the pink tail. Remember, Daddy? The one you gave me. She's my favourite."

"That's ok, honey, Daddy loves you. Good night." And he brushed her cheek with a kiss.

About a week later, after story time, Jenny's daddy asked again, "Do you love me?"

"Daddy, you know I love you."

"Then give me your pearls."

"Oh Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have my baby doll. The brand new one I got for my birthday. She is so beautiful and you can have the yellow blanket that matches her sleeper."

"That's okay. Sleep well. God bless you, little one. Daddy loves you." And as always, he brushed her cheek with a gentle kiss.

A few nights later when her daddy came in, Jenny was sitting on her bed with her legs crossed Indian-style. As he came close, he noticed her chin was

trembling and one silent tear rolled down her cheek. “What is it Jenny? What’s the matter?” Jenny didn’t say anything but lifted her little hand up to her daddy. And when she opened it, there was her little pearl necklace. With a little quiver, she finally said, “Here, Daddy. It’s for you.” With tears gathering in his own eyes, Jenny’s kind daddy reached out with one hand to take the dime store necklace, and with the other hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue velvet case with a strand of genuine pearls and gave them to Jenny. He had had them all the time. He was just waiting for her to give up the dime store stuff so he could give her genuine treasure.

So much like our heavenly Father.

Friends, God is most concerned about your heart. How’s your heart? God’s invitation is to come back, it’s better that way.

It turns out the rest of the book of Zechariah is complicated. From chapter 1 v 7 to the end of chapter 8, there are a series of visions that Zechariah has. They are all visions about what God is going to do – because he has not forgotten his people. Chapters 9-14 are like the book of Revelation – they talk about where its all going in the end. Maybe another way of saying that, is to say that chapters 9-14 really speak of the deep and profound truth, that love wins! What that means is, the book of Zechariah is a book of hope. It’s a book that speaks to us between the dreaming and the coming true.

God has not forgotten you, and he will, one day, bring all things to completion: Love Wins! God speaks like this to the people in Zechariah’s day because they are in a mess. God invites them to come back, because it’s better that way and he’s interested in their hearts, and God’s greatest desire is to bless them.

3 Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan^[a] standing at his right side to accuse him. ²The LORD said to *Satan*, “*The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?*”

³ Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. ⁴The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.”

Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.”

⁵ Then I said, “Put a clean turban on his head.” So, they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by.

⁶ The angel of the LORD gave this charge to Joshua: ⁷ “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘If you will walk in obedience to me and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.

⁸ “Listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. ⁹ See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,’ says the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.

¹⁰ “‘In that day each of you will invite your neighbour to sit under your vine and fig tree,’ declares the LORD Almighty.” (Zechariah 3 v 1-10)

Joshua is the high priest but he is in a mess, just like the people. Zechariah, in his vision, sees Satan standing next to Joshua to accuse Joshua of getting it all horribly wrong – that he is a failure. Between the dreaming and the coming true; when things are tough; when God seems to have forgotten us; we can feel like we have failed. It’s an easy and effective way we can be drawn away from God.

I’m wondering how many of us here today carry with us a sense that, in truth, we’re a bit of a failure when it comes to following God. We try, we try really hard, but we carry a feeling that somehow, we’re not quite good enough. Satan would love you to give up -he really would.

In the vision God recognizes that Joshua has messed up, he’s not the perfect high priest, but the imagery is as beautiful as it is powerful. God takes away the filthy rags – the truth that he’s human and is not perfect. God gives Joshua new fine garments. He says, ‘Hey Joshua, we can start again.’ He then invites Joshua to follow him again. God is the God of the second chance, and the third chance, and the fourth chance..... The God who says again and again: Come back, it’s better this way.

I’m wondering how much God longs for you to hear that this morning? Zechariah’s vision isn’t just for Joshua and the people of Judah, it looks forward to another high priest, the Messiah.

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.
(Mathew 1 v 18-21)

The messiah, the great high priest, Jesus (a form of the name Joshua) is the one who comes to save his people. God, through Zechariah, spoke to his people in the mess. God, in Jesus, comes to be with his people in the mess, but he does much more than that. In Chapter 9 Zechariah begins to prophecy about the future of Judah.

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9 v 9)

Mathew begins his story of Jesus by telling Joseph to name him Jesus because he is the people's saviour. As Mathew comes toward the end of his story of Jesus, he quotes directly from Zechariah 9.

21 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

⁴ This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ “Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’ (Mathew 21 v 1-5)

God comes to us in the mess, does life with us, is crucified but raised from the dead. God had not forgotten, but comes to bring us life. But we still live between the dreaming and the coming true. We still struggle, life does not go as we hope or plan, we still sometimes feel like God is far away. The final chapters of Zechariah look to a time when ‘the Lord will be king over all the earth (14v9)

Through Zechariah God says something like this: “I’ve seen it all. I’ve seen how hard it is. I’ve seen how you’ve tried. I’ve seen the mistakes. I’ve seen how you struggle. I know how it seems I’m not with you. I know how challenging life can be at times. But I am here. I was with the people of Judah. I just longed for them to come back to me. I was always there. And I’m always here, with you. In the mess. Come back, let’s do this thing together. I long for you to be the best you can be. And, just so you know, I’ve got the future. You don’t need to worry about that. Perhaps, again, today, you can trust me. I’m here, when you’re ready.

Preached and Live streamed from Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 3rd December by Rev. Ian Phillips.