

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
 Quincy, Illinois
 Sem. Carl Wicklander (II)

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
 Saturday, July 4, 2026 at 5:00 p.m.
 Sunday, July 5, 2026 at 9:00 a.m.

“Prisoners of Hope”

Zechariah 9:9-12

In any direction were open plains, often desolate, and any human who could be found was hostile. The men were all utterly dependent. They had little freedom of movement, almost no food to eat, consistent torture, and practically no chance of rescue.

In January 1945, outside the city of Cabanatuan on the Philippine island of Luzon, more than 500 American soldiers labored and starved in a camp of Imperial Japan. Mostly consisting of survivors from the infamous Bataan Death March of 1942, these were the last 500 men of what had been thousands. Any man attempting escape faced certain execution if caught. If not caught, he was still alone on an island of hostile forces. This was a scene of complete helplessness and hopelessness.

Although less heralded than *Patton* or *Saving Private Ryan* or *Hacksaw Ridge*, the story of the prisoners at Cabanatuan is remembered in the 2005 film *The Great Raid*. Their story is a suitable parallel as we look at today’s text and consider how we, too, are prisoners.¹

From the prophet Zechariah, Chapter 9:

“Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem;

¹ Kirk Hovious, “The Forgotten Men of Cabanatuan,” *Hawaii Reporter*, February 5, 2016, accessed June 12, 2026, <https://www.hawaiiireporter.com/the-forgotten-men-of-cabanatuan/>. “The Great Raid on Cabanatuan, *Together We Served*, n.d., accessed June 11, 2026, <https://blog.togetherweserved.com/great-raid-on-cabanatuan/>.

*and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations;
his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.
As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from
the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope.”*

Zechariah is a prophet sent to God’s people but the kingdoms of Israel and Judah are increasingly distant memories. Exiles are returning to Judah but they remain under the thumb of the powerful Persian Empire. Earlier in Chapter 9, Zechariah lists off powers and antagonists of Judah, including Tyre, Sidon, and the Philistines, all of whom God humbles of their power and pride. Now Zechariah tells of the Messiah, a king, coming not upon a mighty steed, but a colt, in peace after the mighty have fallen, despite all their great preparation and power.

It is quite a contrast! The king, Jesus, comes in peace after the powers, with their armies and fortresses have disintegrated into dust.²

People who are prisoners, and who know they are prisoners, understand they have no chance of escape. It is easy if you are alone in a dank jail cell, trapped in a sweltering camp in the tropics, or your land has been conquered by an expansive empire. If this describes you, then you understand that getting out requires someone outside to fix it.

But if you’re not in a prison and you have haven’t been conquered, this is a little harder to see. On a weekend when we recognize and celebrate our country’s 250th birthday, it is not so clear that you and I have a prison problem, too.

² R. Reed Lessing, *Zechariah* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House: 2020), 18-27.

It isn't a problem that we are politically independent. As expected, the strong people neighboring Judah built great defenses. The problem came from not trusting the one true God, but themselves, their possessions, and their false gods. They were prisoners of sin and so are we.³

Is there enough money to protect you? Is there is a security system, commercial or military, which can completely protect you? While we indeed have a duty to protect our land, families, and neighbors, we cannot protect ourselves against the sin which controls us. Money and worldly security do not save us from our sin or death. As Jesus says in John 8:34, we are all slaves to sin.

We cannot free ourselves from our waterless pit. Believing there is something we can do to completely protect ourselves from everything exposes how we trust ourselves, not God. Hope is misplaced. We are prisoners to sin.

But what does Zechariah call us to be? Prisoners of hope.

Hope is not mere wishful thinking. Rather, it is truth we cling to even while it remains hidden from our sight.

Jesus comes to bring peace. As our text shows, he is not coming with the most intimidating army in the history of nations. He is coming on a lowly colt, not a war horse. With this passage, we already see ahead to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem upon his colt, where he will face the sanctimony of the religious authorities of his own people and the amazing strength of the Romans (Matthew 21:5).

³ Lessing, 373-378.

Anyone who understands he is a prisoner to sin knows he cannot escape it. It is Jesus' blood that will redeem and save you. In Jesus you will find God's promise to rescue and transform you from a prisoner of sin into a prisoner of hope.

In the face of the religious authorities and Rome, it appeared strength, both in numbers and political power, won the day. Though Jesus took the cross and died, he rose and conquered death for you.

As prisoners of hope, you trust in the works of God over the works of men.

Though we die on this earth, we too, shall live. Peace will come to all nations. That is, God's love for you in Jesus is for all who trust in God's promise to save us. That promise that came through the death and Resurrection of Jesus is the forgiveness of your sins, bought by blood shed for you. Even when you hold a wrong understanding or relationship with money, possessions, or pride, Jesus forgives you. In true victory, the resurrected Jesus opens the prison door which traps you in sin. He grabs you by the hand, pulls you up, and carries you into true freedom which can only come from him. So we remain prisoners of hope because we cling to the one who saves us.

He puts his claim on you at baptism, saying, "You will walk in the newness of life" (Romans 6:4). We drink his blood at the altar and you receive his forgiveness and righteousness. It is yours. You have a new beginning with God because in Christ, he sees righteousness, the righteousness Jesus gives to you. We remain prisoners of the hope of eternal life in Christ Jesus. We can look nowhere else, not in ourselves, and not in our works.⁴ It is as in the Gospel of Luke where, as Simeon waited for the "consolation of Israel" and when he looked upon the young

⁴ *Luther's Works: Lectures on the Minor Prophets III*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, vol. 20 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 291.

Jesus could say, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart *in peace*." And now you go in peace.

The story of the prisoners at Cabanatuan did have a happy ending, or at least as happy as was possible. On the evening of January 31, 1945, a band of US Army Rangers and Filipino resistance fighters freed the 500-plus prisoners with hardly any casualties of their own. Many of the freed prisoners were too malnourished to walk on their own and needed to be carried, illustrating their complete helplessness. We, too, in our spiritual helplessness, have a happy ending. It comes from the work of Jesus to save and rescue us from our pit and prison of sin.

Do continue to work and provide for rainy days. Fulfill your vocations to protect and tend to the family and neighbors God has given you. But also remember what we are here on earth to do. Give glory to God and share the good news of Jesus's death and Resurrection that while this earth will perish, he gives you new life in the kingdom with no end. Amen.