

Sermon- "Be Still and Know That I Am God!"

It has been said that the history of mankind is mostly the history of warfare. Clans, tribes and nations have been going to war against each other since the beginning of recorded history. But it wasn't meant to be that way. God designed his creatures to live in a state of complete harmony. Harmony between man and God, harmony between man and woman, harmony between man and his fellow man, and harmony between man and the earth. This state of things was called *shalom*, or the peace of God. But when sin entered the world, the harmony disappeared and men went to war—war against God, war against each other, and war against the earth itself. Paradise was lost and man lived in a fallen world where competition and combat were the new norms. In other words, men went to war. A symbolic description of this warfare is given in the 6th chapter of the *Book of Revelation* where the four horsemen of the apocalypse are unleashed, one by one. The first horseman is called "conquest" and he symbolizes the lust for power and glory that drives nations to attack and conquer one another. The second horseman is called "war," which is the fruit of the spirit of conquest. The third horseman is called "pestilence," which symbolizes the byproducts of war: economic chaos, famine, disease and suffering. The fourth horseman is called death, which is the ultimate fruit of war and all its byproducts. A perfect example of the four horsemen at work is what happened in Germany between WW1 and WW2. At the end of WW1, the victorious allies imposed a harsh treaty upon Germany called the treaty of Versailles. The treaty carved off large sections of the ancient German homeland and awarded them to her enemies. Drastic financial penalties called reparations were imposed which totaled an astronomical 132 billion marks. Those who had set out to conquer had been conquered and the new conquerors wanted blood money. To pay the reparations, Germany printed vast quantities of money. This produced hyper-inflation which resulted in high rates of unemployment and starvation. The resentful Germans became embittered and their minds turned to thoughts of reprisal against the enemies who were bleeding her to death. That set the stage for the rise of a monomaniac by the name of Adolf Hitler, who led Germany into another war of conquest. Conquest begot war, war begot suffering and death, suffering and death begot thoughts of retaliation which gave birth to a new spirit of conquest. And the beat goes on. And the four horsemen continue to ride the earth with no end in sight. But God has injected a ray of hope into this chaotic, violent history—the promise of a peaceable kingdom ruled by one called the Messiah. Glimmers of this messiah and His kingdom appear throughout the Old Testament. He is the seed of Eve who will crush the head of the serpent. He is the priest Melchizedek, the king of peace, who communed Abraham and to whom Abraham gave one tenth of his possessions. He is a star that would rise out of Jacob, a scepter who would rule over Israel.

He is Shiloh, to whom would be the obedience of the nations. He is David's son and David's Lord, whose throne would last forever. He is Immanuel, the son of a virgin whose name means "God with us." He is the suffering servant of Yahweh who would bear our sins and be crushed for our iniquities. These glimmers of the coming kingdom may have been what led Martin Luther to say that when he read the scriptures, he often saw the face of Christ peering out at him. For those who had eyes to see and ears to hear, these Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament were assurances that God would one day send a Savior--not only to Israel, but to all mankind.

One of the most eloquent prophets of this messiah and his kingdom was Zechariah. Zechariah was both a priest and a prophet who prophesied between 520 and 518 b.c. It was a tumultuous time for Israel: King Darius of Persia had issued a decree which freed the Israelites from their Babylonian captors and allowed them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. According to Nehemiah as the Israelites raised up the walls of the new temple, they were harassed and attacked by local bandits and Samaritan enemies, so as they worked on the walls they kept one hand on the hilts of their swords. Their minds were fixed on the prospect of a new temple and the renewal of temple sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins--but Zechariah's mind was focused on the coming of the Messianic kingdom. He wrote: "rejoice greatly, o daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." 500 years later, Matthew would cite Zechariah's prophecy as evidence that Jesus was the promised messiah when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey on the day we call Palm Sunday. At the time Zechariah was prophesying, the idea that a king would enter a city of his subjects mounted on a donkey rather than a war-horse was unheard of. But this was a clue as to what messiah and his kingdom would be like: no hand on the hilt of a sword, no war-horse, no retinue of soldiers, no blaring trumpets, no demonstration of power or majesty. Just "...righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey..." Nothing so astounds us as the idea that love and gentleness have more power than worldly pomp and circumstance. The worldly powers will all fade away, but love and gentleness will remain forever. Zechariah continues, "I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. [Messiah] will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the [Euphrates River] to the ends of the earth." The coming messianic kingdom would be not only for Israel, but would extend over the entire earth. It's not hard to imagine how these words would have fallen upon the ears of the soldiers who were erecting the walls of a new temple. The kingdom they were looking for—a kingdom of armed power and fortifications—was completely different from the peaceable kingdom Zechariah was proclaiming. That is why like the prophets who preceded him, Zechariah was not popular with his own people.

He continues, "As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit." Now the kingdom is expanded to include the entire cosmos: the spiritual world as well as the physical world. Men will not only be saved from the swords of their human enemies, they will be saved from "the waterless pit"--from hell itself. The new kingdom would be a refuge from sin, from death and from Satan. Finally, "return to your fortress, O prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you." In other words, I will bless you twice as much as you have sinned. Isaiah had written, "comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." "She has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins!" As Paul wrote: "where sin did abound, grace did super-abound." God's grace is so vast that it covers all the sins of mankind and his love is so great that it banishes all the assaults of the enemy. I have recently had occasion to experience the power of God's love. As most of you know, for the past three months my grandson Wyatt has been seeking treatment for two particularly serious diseases. One is called intestinal colitis and is a disease of the lower large intestine. It has not responded to medicinal treatment and may require surgery. A larger problem was that he appeared to have a liver disease which the doctors were unable to diagnose but was serious enough to warrant a transplant. A week ago last Monday a biopsy of Wyatt's liver was performed to see if the doctors could come up with a diagnosis. As you can imagine, during this time our family and friends have been praying for Wyatt. Now I'm sure that everybody here has gone through a similar situation--where someone close to you--someone you love--is threatened with a serious problem. Maybe it was a health problem like Wyatt has. Maybe they were struggling with some addiction. Maybe they were struggling with their faith. You know how it goes: do all you can for them and after you have done that all you can, all that is left is to pray. So you and your friends pray and you pray and you pray but deep down there is a nagging doubt that things are going to turn out well. If you've gone through that, you know what our family has been going through. Then last Sunday morning, as I was taking a shower, a thought came to me: why in the world wouldn't God heal Wyatt? He loves him, so why wouldn't he heal him? Of course he's going to heal him! At that moment I began to believe that things would turn out ok. Two days later, the results of the biopsy came back and showed that Wyatt had a healthy liver, and that its chaotic activity may have been an allergic reaction to the medicine he had been taking for his intestinal problems. God had come through for us again. That is a thought we would do well to cling to these days. There is no question that we are going through hard times. We are: beset with a virus that won't go away; we are confined to our homes; political and social dissensions are raging outside and there is economic uncertainty lying ahead.

Nursing homes that have been turned into virtual prisons so that residents can't even see the faces of their loved ones. We need to stop and take a breath and recall the words of the 46th psalm: "come and behold the works of the Lord, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars to cease to the ends of the earth, he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, He burns the chariots with fire: *be still and know that I am God.*" "Be still and know that I am God." God is in control! He will not only bring an end to our woes; he will bring good out of them, for, "...God causes all things to work together for good for those who love him and have been called according to his promise." So rejoice, daughter of Zion! Your king comes to you righteous and having salvation! Amen.