

“He Shall Bring Peace to the Nations”

Zechariah 9:9–12

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion... behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey.”

Zechariah paints a picture of a King unlike any other. Not a king who rides in on a warhorse, not a king who flexes military might, not a king who demands tribute. In gentle humility, He comes to save. And then Zechariah says, this King has a message to declare: “He shall speak peace to the nations.” Not just to Israel. Not just to the faithful. Not just to the people who already know Him. To the nations. To all peoples. To the world.

On this Fourth of July—especially on the 250th anniversary of our nation—we hear those words with a certain ache, because we know how fragile peace is. We know how quickly unity can fracture. We know how easily nations can turn inward, suspicious, fearful, angry. But Zechariah’s promise is not about what nations can accomplish. It’s about what *this King* accomplishes. The King who rides a donkey into Jerusalem. The King who stretches out His hands on the cross. The King who rises from the dead and breathes peace on His disciples. Jesus Christ is the only King who brings peace that lasts.

Lutheran theology has a particular gift to bring to days like this. We call it the doctrine of the two kingdoms. In the *left-hand kingdom*, God rules through governments, laws, vocations, and earthly authority. This is where nations rise and fall, where constitutions are written, where armies defend, where courts judge, where citizens vote, where leaders rise and sometimes fall. The left-hand kingdom is the State, the realm of laws.

In the *right-hand kingdom*, God rules through His Word and Sacraments. Here He forgives sins, creates faith, gathers His people, and brings the peace the world cannot give. The right-hand kingdom is The Church, “the hand that holds the cross,” where grace rules the day.

Both kingdoms are God’s. Both are gifts. But they are not the same.

And the trouble begins when we confuse them—when we expect the government to do what only Christ can do, or when we expect the Church to become a political instrument to be used by someone else. Just a glance at history reveals that when the Church tries to do the State’s job, or the State tries to do the Church’s job, things go bad, even with the best intentions.

The United States—250 years old this year—is a remarkable nation. A nation with a history of courage, sacrifice, innovation, and ideals that have inspired millions, if not billions of people around the world. And yet, it remains the left-hand kingdom. It cannot save. It cannot redeem. It cannot bring the peace Zechariah promises. Only Jesus can do that.

The Fourth of July (or the fifth, or any day that you would choose) is a day to give thanks for the blessings of our earthly home. God’s people have always done this, no matter where they are. The prophet Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon—of all places—“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you.” St. Paul told the Romans to honor the governing authorities—to pray for Roman officials. Martin Luther said that good government is one of God’s greatest earthly gifts.

So today, let us give thanks for the freedoms we enjoy; for the sacrifices made by generations before us; for the ideals of liberty and justice; for the ability to worship without fear; for the opportunities our nation provides. These are profound gifts. Our nation's sons and daughters have fought and died to preserve these blessings, and if we're being candid we would admit that today we simply expect these things to be true. We assume they just apply to us as a matter of course, but they have always come with a high price. That being said, we need only study history to remember that nations—even great ones—are temporary. Early Christian convert and pastor St. Augustine said that earthly kingdoms are like tents pitched along the road of history. They serve their purpose, and then they pass. Only the Kingdom of Christ endures forever.

And of Christ Jesus, the prophet Zechariah said, "He shall speak peace to the nations." Not "He shall negotiate peace." Not "He shall enforce peace." Not "He shall inspire peace." He shall speak it. He shall declare it. He shall create it. Properly defined, the peace Jesus brings is not the absence of conflict. It is the presence of reconciliation—between God and humanity, and then between people. This peace is not achieved by treaties, elections, or military strength. It is achieved by the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross.

And here's the thing: this peace is not fragile. It does not depend on public opinion or a majority vote. It does not shift with political winds. It is anchored in the resurrection of Christ. And this peace is for all nations—including ours.

In 1863, during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to a grieving mother who had lost five sons in battle. In it he said: "I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement." Lincoln was painfully aware that human leaders can instigate war, but only God can heal hearts. Even at the height of national conflict, he pointed beyond the nation to the God who alone brings peace. That is the Lutheran instinct. That is the Christian confession. That is Zechariah's promise.

Zechariah ends with a phrase tailor-made for Christians living in any nation, at any time: "Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope." We are not prisoners of fear, or prisoners of political anxiety, or prisoners of nostalgia or despair. We are prisoners of **hope**—captured, held, and sustained by the promise of Christ's peace.

And because we belong to Christ's eternal kingdom, we are truly free; free to serve faithfully in our earthly one: We are free to love our neighbors, backing that up with action. Free to pray for leaders, no matter who is in office at a given moment. Free to seek the good of our communities. Free to disagree without hatred. Free to hope without fear. Because our King has come. Because our King reigns. Because our King brings peace to the nations.

Therefore, we celebrate. We celebrate with gratitude the blessings of the USA. With humility about its limits. With responsibility in our vocations as citizens. With clarity about the difference between the two kingdoms. With confidence that Christ's kingdom is unshakable. With the expectation and joy that our true King has come, humble and riding on a donkey, righteous and having salvation, speaking peace that no nation can give and no nation can take away.

