



Seeking the Paradoxical God

Zechariah 1:7-21

By John Seago

- My name is John Seago, I'm a partner here and it's a joy to be with you this morning.
- Story of Andy at the movies
 - When I was in college I was very serious about philosophy and studying, and subsequently had about three friends. One of them was Andy. He was a character, he would easily get totally wrapped up in experiences and moments. He was the kind of guy that every book he was reading was either THE BEST BOOK EVER, or EXACTLY WHATS WRONG WITH SOCIETY. There was no middle ground for Andy. I was a stoic thinker and only lived in the middle ground you know. Well, one time we went to the movies to see Spiderman 3 (the one w/ tobey mcguire). It was terrible, spider man went all emo and there was that long campy, awful jazz dance scene. Just a train wreck. That dance scene is why the franchise had to have a reboot. But I remember, Andy coming out of that theater, literally stumbling with excitement. I was right in front of him but he still yelled "DID YOU SEE THAT?!" He was psyched out of his mind. He couldn't stop talking about how this movie was the pentacle of the super hero genre. I being the level headed philosopher, just quietly criticized the plot holes, inconsistencies and utter absurdity of the film.
- I think about that kind of level of awe images can have on us. There are experiences, concerts, works of art, movies even where we are struck and profoundly compelled.
- This is the effect that the fantastic visions in Zechariah should have on us.
 - Jonathan talked about this last week when introducing this book and apocalyptic literature in the Bible.
- Zechariah contains opulent and visceral imagery. We read these lush visions of odd and perplexing scenes that seem to be from a Salvador Dali painting, not a sermon at church, right?
- Remember from last week, the purpose of this literature: meant to break up ingrained patterns of thinking by delivering life-altering messages through otherworldly images.
- In our passage today we see God gives Zechariah two night visions here, this should not freak us out.¹ The prophet is being visually shown something but not in a hypnotic way. Zechariah engages the visions, he'll ask questions and reflect on the meaning of what he's seeing and that what we're going to do this morning.
- These visions are important not just because they can have a impact on us in the moment, but they last. We rely on these as ongoing mental images throughout our daily life.
 - This image of Andy stumbling out of the theater stuck with me through our friendship, and it became the filter by which I interpreted all his recommendations and opinions from then on. He'd tell me about a book he just read or a new musician to check out I'd always have this in the back of my head (well, I'll be the

¹ Hebrews 1 tells that God has spoken to various people in various ways.

judge of whether Imogen Heap is as talented as you say she is, after all you loved Spiderman 3 at first)

- I'm excited for this series, because we need to be overwhelmed with compelling images of God's glory, his work in the world, and his lavish commitment to us. We need to update our mental images, our default views of God with these.

Both of our images have two sides to them, so we'll look first at the anger of the Lord of Hosts in both visions, then the Mercy of a Jealous God, then how we Live in the Paradox.

I. The anger of the Lord of Hosts

A. In this night vision Zechariah sees a man mounted on a red horse in front of myrtle trees by the deep, with an multitude of red, sorrel and white horses behind him. (Sorrel is a copper red or chestnut brown color. Yes, I'm a stereotypical guy I had to look that one up)

- Overall though, this is vision of a frightening scene. A might man mounted on a red horse before us. He's mounted, we get the image of war and aggression.
- Furthermore, he has an army of horses behind him.
- Today, we may associate horses with luxury or sport even, but in Scripture horses are military symbols of power and war.²
- So, here we see the main horseman has an army.
- But, the center of the first night vision, and arguably of the whole book of Zechariah, is in verse 8: this lead horseman.
 - Now oddly, Zechariah doesn't ask this, but we need to ask, who is he?
 - **This man mounted on the red horse is a Pre-incarnate revelation of the coming Christ.**
 - In OT we see in various times Christ showing up, before being born into human flesh.
 - Visits Abraham, fourth man in furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, mounted on a horse and leads Joshua into battle.
 - John 1:1 even tells us that Christ was in Genesis as the agent of creation by which God the Father used to fashion the universe.
 - So here, we have a vision of the Messianic Creator-Redeemer at the center stage of our vision.³
- To be faced with this figure should be frightening, let's look at a fuller revelation of this Messiah, in John's apocalyptic vision in Revelation 19.
- This is a visceral image, read carefully here with me. Revelation 19:11-18 - Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. **12** His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. **13** He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is

² Psalm 20:7-8 reads "Some trust in vchariots and some in whorses, xbut we trust in the name of the LORD our God. **8** They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright."

In Haggai 2:20, the Lord says, "I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, **22** and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms. I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and moverthrow the chariots and their riders. And the horses and their riders shall go down, nevery one by the sword of his brother."

³ He's a cosmic warrior, see imagery from Habakkuk 3 of creation as war.

called is The Word of God. **14** And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. **15** From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. **16** On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

- **17** Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, “Come, gather for the great supper of God, **18** to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.”
 - Do you feel that? This vision should make us stumble out of here like Andy.
 - I love this, this is some serious smack talk. The angel calls the birds to get ready to feast on the flesh of the Messiah’s enemies. This is a serious figure.
 - Now, you may be listening this morning as a skeptic or a seeker and you may not be convinced. You may not be impressed.
 - I challenge you this morning to update that filter and preconceived notion you may have of who Christ is: a moral teacher with some advice or a lunatic. Christ is the messianic cosmic redeemer.
 - These are evidences that there is something in us that longs for a Messiah, and it comes out in literature, art and film.
 - Christ is not just a character straight out of central casting, he’s more. He’s exceedingly more complex than John Wayne or Luke Skywalker.
 - Christ is the victorious Messiah who conquered death itself.
 - His life and work is the Gospel.
 - This is who is at the center stage of our vision and we’ll see him again in Zechariah.
- Zechariah sees that the pre-incarnate Messiah in front of Myrtle trees by the deep.
 - Myrtle trees are not commonly cited in Scripture, but they are used for the feast of booths.⁴ A Jewish holiday to celebrate historical event of the Exodus, when the Hebrews were rescued out of Egypt and entered into the dessert and subsequently the promised land.
 - The biggest hurdle of Israel’s Exiting Egypt was the crossing of the Red Sea.
 - Moses praises the Lord for this event in Exodus 15:1: “I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea...Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea, and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea. **5** The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.”
- Myrtle trees were by the deep
 - Israel passed through the deep, and pharaohs chariots, hosts, and officers went down in the deep.
 - Also, first usage of “deep” was in the Creation narrative, Genesis 1.⁵
 - Remember, the Creator-Redeemer was there too.

⁴ Nehemiah 8

⁵ Genesis 1:2: “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”

- *All these images and reference are intertwined to tell us the identity and authority of this figure.*
- That continues when Zechariah asks the angel with him about the many horses, the Messiah spoke and said that these horsemen were sent by the Lord to patrol the earth.
 - We'll see these horsemen again in ch 6 with war chariots, but here they are just patrolling, scouting out the land like before a war or a military attack.
 - And the horsemen's report isn't promising.
 - They bring back infuriating news: The nations are at rest, they're living it up, they are not worried but are comfortable in their opposition to the Lord of Hosts.
- Verse 12: Then the Messiah cries out to the Lord *"O LORD of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?"*
 - Remember, the Lord promised Israel' peace, their restoration and welfare.
- They just returned from their 70 years in exile as punishment for breaking covenant with God, but we see in Jeremiah the Lord promised it would only be 70 years.
- They returned home but the question remained: where's the welfare and restoration, defeat of enemies?
- All Israel's enemies are fine, justice has not been restored, it's a perplexing problem that God seems inactive.
- Doesn't look like God is holding up his end of the covenant.

B. Let's look at the related second vision in Verse 18-19

- **READ: 18** And I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four horns! **19** And I said to the angel who talked with me, "What are these?" And he said to me "These are the horns that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem."
- Horns are a symbol of strength and military power. Sometimes used to refer to whole armies or nations.
 - If your horn is raised up – you have power and victory
 - Once someone's horn is laid low or cut off, they've been brought to shame
- In verse 21, the angel tells us that the horns are the unbelieving nations that scattering the people of God. (SEE MAP)
 - God's people here just came out of 70 years of exile that was caused by Babylonian attacks on Jerusalem then Israel was still reigned by Medes and Persian Empire once they defeated the Babylonians.
- God using other nations to discipline his people.⁶
 - Hab 1:5-6 – "Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. **6** For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own."
- Four horns represent enemies on each side, like the four ends of a compass.⁷
- For us, we have the vantage point to see that God is the Lord of history.

⁶ Historically, we can trace the various nations that oppressed Israel:

- Assyria in 722BC
- Babylon in 586BC
- Persians in Zechariah's day
- Greece and Roman Empire closer to birth of Christ

⁷ Four winds of heaven, discussed later in Zechariah, four corners of the earth.

- So, when we're looking at this mounted warrior in our vision, we see that world history itself, nations and whole civilizations are the host, the troops, that he commands.
- Now, these images should also be compelling and overwhelming to us this morning.⁸ We too are at odds with the Lord of Hosts. We too have adopted idols just like Israel.
 - We were created and called to worship God, but we daily turn away from the Creator-Redeemer to worship the idol of the self.
- Whether you're a Christian or not this morning, we're all in the same spot of being violators of God's moral code that is explicit in Scripture and evident in nature.

So, when we put ourselves back in the story here, these night visions should overwhelm us. We should be stumbling over ourselves to see that we broke covenant with the mounted warrior who commanded the nations against his own people.

II. The Mercy of a Jealous God

In both of these images we're not just left trembling.

We see this fierce power, a creator-warrior who commands all of history, is used to accomplish and further God's mercy and grace.

A. Look back at verse 13 in the first vision.

- When the question is asked "how long will you be angry with Israel for breaking the covenant" Look at the Lords response in verse 13.
- The Lord of Hosts spoke gracious words. This is the complex character of God.
 - He is a mighty warrior, he's fought in battle, he commands the nations like chess pieces, BUT he is motivated by his jealousy for Jerusalem.
 - Remember that covenant relationship God and his people are in?
 - In Exodus 20, when making that covenant, he says "I am a jealous God"
 - Here he is "exceedingly jealous"
 - The Lord wants exclusive worship and attention from his people, from us.
 - Scripture uses the imagery of a jealous husband who still loves and seeks after his adulterous wife.
 - That is us. Like Israel, when we break covenant with God and return to sin, God is not apathetic. He does not turn his back on us or become bitter to us.
 - **God's jealousy moves Him to save his people.**
 - God's jealousy is not a vice, or an imperfection, its actually part of his perfect love. It's the expression of his mercy and how much he cherishes us.
 - I encourage you today to examine your heart, where have you been adulterous this month? this week? This morning?
 - Our eyes start to wander to lust after cheap sins and destructive idols when we have the most beautiful and sublime savior in front of us.
- Look at those gracious and comforting words in verse 16-17 and see what God wants to do in Jerusalem. A few things:
 - 1) He has returned to them with mercy.

⁸ Distinction of Beautiful vs Sublime experiences via Kant?

- 2) He will allow his house to be built in Jerusalem
- 3) The measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem
- These three things show that God will once again dwell among his people.⁹
 - So this is great news.
 - **God's presence itself is an abundant treasure for his people.**
 - Psalm 51:10: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. **11** Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. **12** Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.
- People were rebuilding the Temple, and we saw in Nehemiah, some of God's people were sad because the new Temple was not as big and elaborate as the old one, but God is saying I will still be there.¹⁰

B. We see God's mercy in the second vision as well.

- Remember those horns scatter Israel out of their land close to God, but now look at verse 20.
- Four Craftsmen also come and casting down those horns, these other idolatrous nations.
 - Earlier, God was exceedingly jealous for us, and now he's exceedingly angry at these enemies of God's people.
 - So, he's sent craftsmen to Terrify and cast down these oppressors.
- Remember, before the nations were at ease and rest, which was upsetting to the Lord.
 - Craftsmen, are consistent with construction motif here in book.¹¹
 - These are not hipsters, making handmade, artisan beanies or something. These craftsmen would have brawny arms, holding heavy hammers, may be blacksmiths with blackened faces and clothes worn by physically demanding labor.
 - So these are intimidating guys.
 - **BUT they're not the reason the horns are terrified**
 - **The nations should have feared the craftsmen, boss, the Lord of Hosts who just punished even his own people who turned to idols.**
 - In Romans 11, Paul makes this point to Gentiles of his day, saying if God punishes Jews for rejecting in Christ, why do you think you'll be spared if you also reject him.
 - By the exile and shaping world history, God is proclaiming that he judges covenant breakers that is a terrifying notion.¹²
 - Lord is clear in prophets like Jeremiah and Habakkuk about this. He explicitly explains his plans for world history and raising up Babylon to punish Israel.¹³

⁹ One of the most severe things of the exile was to not having the Temple to worship the Lord, remember that is where his presence dwelt. Even worse a few years into the exile, Nebuchadnezzar, Babylonian king destroyed the Temple. This is deeply heartbreaking, similar to Adam and Eve being cast out of the Garden where they had an close relationship with God. They were cast out of his presence. Same for Israel, that's why the images of Israel and Jerusalem are so significant in Scripture, not because of the architecture, but they symbolize dwelling with God.

¹⁰ God is rebuilding the whole city: measuring line, which will continue in our next section.

¹¹ Craftsmen are vitally important to the economy, the flourishing and existences of city. They build walls, buildings, but also make weapons

¹² Nahum's warning to unbelieving city of Nineveh: "Desolate! Desolation and ruin! eHearts melt and fknees tremble; ganguish is in all loins; hall faces grow pale!"(2:10)

¹³ Jeremiah 50:45-46:

- But he's shaping history for the purpose of Redemptive History and that the Christ would come in the 'fullness of time.'¹⁴
- In this vision, God works through the craftsman, who cast down the nations, and lift up their own horns. They are working for the lead horseman, the Messiah.

III. Living in the Paradox

- In these two compelling visions we see two elements of God's character: He's an almighty omnipotent terrifying force, but he uses that strength for our good. The almighty warrior speaks gracious and comforting words to us.
- This is one of the great paradoxes of the character of God: His love is what is driving his fervor.¹⁵
 - Romans 11:22: "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness."
 - This is related to that covenant God has with his people. He's deadly serious about breaking it, but he sacrifices himself for them to stay in it.
- You've probably seen it in our community, a mother runs and snatches her toddler off the sidewalk before walking into traffic. The abrupt and swift intervention scares the child, they may even cry, but its because she loves her child, she embraces that child. This is the co-mingling of love and fury.¹⁶ –Everyone knows, Moms have fury, don't get in their way.
- **Three ways to live in this paradox:**
- **1) Look into the face the Lord of Hosts and our Jealous Lord.**
 - One shocking phenomenon to me is how we walk around with mental images of peoples' faces and when we're with them we rely on that image instead of really seeing the person.
 - Example: My Dad recently turned 60 years old and we went and celebrated and I was trying to wrap my head around this because in my mind he's not that old. But when we went to visit him I looked at his face, really took in the details and it amazing how I've not updated my mental image for years. The lines on his face, his hair color, these details showed me the real man whom I'm in a relationships with. This cultivates my affections for him.
- We need to metaphorically look into the face of the Lord and make sure our mental images and vision of our personal God match reality.
 - Remind ourselves who we really are in covenant with.
 - Personally, we like to think of God only in terms of a mighty Lord of History or as a gracious presence that only wants comfort for us.

¹⁴ Galatians 4:4

¹⁵ We see these two sides throughout the Bible, especially in the prophets: Nahum 1:7-8 "The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. 8 But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness."

¹⁶ In Fellowship of the Ring, before Bilbo Baggins leaves on his journey Gandalf the wizard, tells Bilbo to leave the ring behind. Bilbo, argues and says Gandalf just wants the ring for himself. At this point, Gandalf towering over the short hobbit raises his voice and uses magic to darken the room "Bilbo Baggins, do not take me for some conjurer of cheap tricks, I'm not trying to rob you, then the candles are lit again, and he says softly, "I'm trying to help you." At this point the small hobbit runs to hug Gandalf like a little scared child. Then the wizard bending down, says "all these long years we've been friends, trust me as you once did."

- Whenever something happens in life that doesn't match that default inaccurate mental image of God, we're at a loss right?
 - If your vision of God is the grand distant Creator & fierce warrior, you don't accept his grace. You don't openly receive his grace and acceptance.
 - But, if your vision of God is the accepting comforter, you don't always accept his calls to be holy and his discipline when you sin. You struggle with explaining why we don't always live in comfort and ease.
- We need to examine the paradoxical vision of God that Zech and scripture gives us.
- **2) Fervently seek to return to the Lord, and accept his mercy when we fail.**
 - When noticing they we're in a covenant with this mighty Messiah we could be compelled to work and work to meet him halfway to avoid his judgment.
 - However, God is returning to us with mercy and he makes a home to dwell with us as his people.
 - The way we live in the paradox is to fear the Lord, but embrace his mercy to us.
 - So, I'm tempted to grit my teeth and trying to overcome a besetting sin again and again, when I fail, I don't confess or repent, I just keep trying in my own strength to perform for this intimidating God. However, living in the paradox means trying to overcome sin by habit and effort, but when I fail, I embrace his grace. I humbly confess and repent and accept his mercy on my failure.
 - Early church is an example of this: Acts 9:31: "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. [EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE BEING PERSECUTED AT THE TIME] And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied."
 - That's the kind of Christians and church we need to pray and work to be: we walk in both the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.
- **3) Cry out when he doesn't make sense.**
 - Two times (v14 and v17) the Lord commands that they Cry Out.
 - Look at when this happens. In the first image they are perplexed that God promised to do something and hasn't done it yet.
 - In verses 17 & v21: There are promises that the cities will overflow with prosperity, and God will cast down horns of other nations.
 - Now these promises are fulfilled, but not necessarily how Israel wanted them to.
 - God's mercy looks different than we expected. This is a lot of the controversy of Jesus' incarnation, he was supposed to ride into Jerusalem like the vision, mounted on a horse with hosts ready to physically conquer Rome and establish Israel as the political power.
 - **Historically, Israel didn't get power or prosperity.**
 - God delivered better than just political power: his incarnate presence and the Holy Spirit.
 - Metaphorically Jesus came as a warrior, he said with a sword, but he's slaying mightier enemies and adversaries than the Babylonians or Persians.
 - This crying out here though actually means to proclaim truth about God.
 - So crying out is not an act of disbelief, it was built on the assumption that God honors his covenant.

- We need to be genuine in our prayers and honest in our community. When something does not make sense, when our circumstances make it hard to believe he's gracious to us, when the Lord is not giving us success, comfort, or victory over sin in our lives.
- But also proclaiming truth in the community: Reminding each other, the Lord is jealous and remind each other of his promises even when it does not look like God's delivering.

So this morning, I urge you to look into the face of our Lord, Return to him and accept his mercy, and cry out often to our fierce and merciful Messiah.