

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, February 24, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

## “THE QUIET AND POWERFUL SPIRIT”

Zechariah 4:6

In my daily quiet time I have been reading through the minor prophets, and to my great benefit. Now some major prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. But the minor prophets are those short books which are tucked away at the end of the Old Testament. If you need the Bible index to find them don't feel badly about that. Even preachers have to do that. Now they may be called minor prophets, but they had a major message for the people of Israel, and for us today. As I read through them, I am struck by how many phrases from the minor prophets are in our hymns, and how some of their images have become part of our common speech, and mostly by how they prophecy the coming of the Messiah.

Now nearly every prophetic book follows a common pattern. First, through the prophet God gave a message to the people warning them about their sin and the judgement to come. This usually made the prophets quite unpopular. Next, God spoke of the punishment that would take place unless the people fixed their ways, which they usually didn't, at least not for long. But then the prophet followed his message of judgement and punishment with the promise of God's mercy upon the people leading to restoration and renewal. God just wouldn't let his people go. He had a great promise to fulfill through them. Judgement, punishment, mercy. That was the pattern. Some prophets spoke before judgement happened; some spoke during the time of punishment; others spoke after God's mercy had been shown and restoration was taking place.

The prophet Zechariah falls into the latter category. God raised him up to speak to the Hebrew people after they had been set free from their exile in Babylon. The punishment had ended. This occurred around 538 B.C. The people joyfully headed home to Israel under the kingly leadership of both Zerubbabel, and the high priest, Joshua. But when the people arrived home they were shocked. During the 70 years they had been away, the land had been neglected, many houses in Jerusalem were in ruins, and the beloved Temple, the house of God, had been ransacked and torn down. There was much hard work to be done. They laid the foundation for a new temple, but after a few years, work came to a halt. The people were discouraged. There were even some who actively opposed rebuilding God's house. They said, "Why are we putting all this effort into the temple? Let's focus on rebuilding our own houses."

But Zechariah spoke God's word of encouragement to the people. Now there are many images in Zechariah's message in chapter 4, a lampstand with a bowl, two olive trees with two branches pouring oil through golden pipes, as well as a great mountain. But the main message is straightforward. Chapter 4, verse 6, "The Lord said to me, Zechariah, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." God's

Spirit was with Zerubbabel and the people. God's Spirit was at work among them. So the people should not be discouraged, but keep on working. For God's promise would be fulfilled. Despite the difficulties the temple would be completed under Zerubbabel's leadership. God's Spirit was at work among them, quietly and powerfully.

It's a message for us. Often we focus on the challenges and difficulties we face. But let's not overlook this truth. God's Spirit is at work among us. God's Spirit is working in us and through us to accomplish God's purposes. "Not by human might, nor by human power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord. God's Spirit is at work among us, quietly and powerfully.

*First, God's Spirit is at work among us turning mountains into level plains.*

To the Hebrew people, the rebuilding of the temple seemed like a mountain that was impossible to move or get over. But God's word to the people was this, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts. What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain; and he shall bring out the top stones amid shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!'"

So it was not by human strength, at least not human strength and effort alone, that the Temple would be built. It would be built by God's Spirit at work through Zerubbabel and the people. Now the Hebrews had to keep working at it diligently. And this great project would be completed, not by their own inadequate efforts, but by God's Spirit which would make their efforts sufficient. It was God's will and God's plan, and it would be fulfilled. And when it was finished the people would recognize that God had made it all possible. "Grace, grace to it." And grace refers to God's love and God's Spirit in action, above and beyond all human effort.

Have you ever faced some task or challenge that seemed like an immovable mountain? It could be something to do with work, health, family life, finances, some grave affliction or personal difficulty. Whatever it is, it seems impossible to conquer. You see no way over it or around it. It seems as hard as rock and as solid as iron. Your own strength and wisdom cannot remove it. This huge mountain is a cause of weariness and anxiety.

But God's word comes to you, saying, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit." God is working with you, quietly yet powerfully to overcome that great mountain. Now God may be removing that mountain piece by piece. Or perhaps he is leaving the mountain there but showing you a way around it or even leading you over it. No mountain can resist the power of God's Spirit when God wills it gone. No opposition can finally stand against the work of God's Spirit. No mountain is too big for God, not even the mountain of sin and evil and death which held us hostage and blocked our way into God's Kingdom. But that great mountain gave way through the power of God's Spirit working through his crucified and risen Son.

Whatever mountain you are facing please trust that God is working with you and in you, quietly and powerfully, by his Spirit. Of course, you have a part to play, cooperating with God's Spirit. But by God's Spirit that great mountain is becoming a plain. One day it will be gone for good and you will say, "Grace, grace to it. Thanks be to God!"

I know that many of you have had such an experience of grace. I have. You've been greatly troubled by some mountain, but then suddenly, almost miraculously, it disappeared. And you knew it was not by your own power and might, but by the quiet and powerful work of God's Spirit. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit." God's Spirit is at work among us, making mountains into level plains.

*Secondly, God's Spirit is at work among us, even in the day of small things.*

Verses 8-10. '...the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice..."

Few of the returning exiles would have remembered Solomon's Temple. Those who did would have been very elderly. But in exile, the people had shared stories of how grand and glorious the temple had been. And with the passage of time, it probably became even greater in memory and imagination. But now that the foundation was laid, it was obvious that the new temple would be much smaller than the former temple. It was a day of small things, and the people became discouraged. But through the prophet God told them that God's Spirit was still at work even in this new situation. They would see the completion of the temple and rejoice.

This sometimes happens in the church. A few years ago one of our long-time members who is now in heaven showed me an Annual Report from 1965. There were 450 children registered in our Sunday School with an average attendance of 230. Attendance at worship was higher than today. Two Sunday morning services were being considered. It would be easy for us to get discouraged when we see those numbers. We say, "If only things could be like that now. God's Spirit was really at work in those days."

But those days are not coming back. They had their problems, too. I looked more closely at that report and I noticed some interesting facts. In comparison our stewardship level has increased significantly, not just because of inflation, but in real terms. We give more today. That's good. We are doing more now in our outreach programs. Numbers don't tell the whole story.

Later today we will consider our 2018 Annual Report. It was a good year and we have much to be thankful for. Yes, numbers are smaller today. But God's Spirit is still at work among us, quietly and powerfully. God's Spirit is enabling us to do significant ministry in Jesus' Name. So don't despise the day of small things. God's Spirit is working among us, giving us reason to rejoice. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of Hosts."

*Finally, let's consider how God's quiet and powerful Spirit comes to us.*

In verses 11 -14 Zechariah asked the angel about the vision he received. "'What are these two olive trees on the right and on the left of the lampstand?' He asked the angel a second time, 'What are these two branches of the olive trees, which pour out the oil through two golden pipes? The angel said to him, 'These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth.'" Interpreters tell us that the olive trees were the kingly and the priestly offices in Israel. The two branches were represented by Zerubbabel the kingly leader and Joshua the priest.

The oil was the Spirit God was pouring out in abundance on these servants, and through them to the people.

But all prophecy points beyond itself to the ultimate fulfillment. God's fulfillment was not two branches, but one branch who is both priest and king, and prophet for that matter – Jesus Christ. All the streams of prophecy and sacred history lead to him. And the prophetic pattern-judgement, punishment and mercy was fulfilled in and through him. In his death on the cross he was judged and punished in our place in order to set us free from the power of sin and evil and death. By his resurrection from the dead God's Son brings us justification and eternal life. He is the One Branch of God who is now the source of the Holy Spirit. The oil of God's Spirit flows through Christ him to all who look to him in faith. As we put our trust in Jesus Christ God pours the Spirit upon us in abundance, empowering us for our God-given task. And while no one can see the future for this church or any other, we know for certain that the church which looks constantly to its Lord shall endure and bear good fruit.

“Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of Hosts.” God Spirit is working among us, quietly and powerfully. May God's grace be upon us as we continue to build on God's one Branch, the firm and everlasting foundation, Jesus Christ our Lord.