



## SENIORS, ELDERS, AND GRANDPARENTS DAY

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, September 13, 2009**

**Makeba Lindsay D'Abreu, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

National Director, Domestic HIV Programs for The Balm in Gilead, Richmond, VA

**Lection - Zechariah 8:3-6** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 3) Thus says the Lord: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. (v. 4) Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. (v. 5) And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. (v. 6) Thus says the Lord of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the Lord of hosts?

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

*Grandparents Day* was founded by Marian McQuade in West Virginia to champion the cause of lonely elderly in nursing homes, and persuade grandchildren to tap the wisdom and heritage of their grandparents.<sup>1</sup> The idea was spurred by the “Past 80 Parties” Mrs. McQuade organized. As part of the planning, she visited nursing homes and was moved by the residents’ loneliness.

Inspired, she organized day visits called *Grandparents Day* to honor grandparents wherever they lived; and to give grandparents the opportunity to show love for, identify strengths of, share with, and guide one another.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter proclaimed the first Sunday after Labor Day as *National Grandparents Day*. The proclamation declared grandparents as “our continuing tie to the near-past, to events and beliefs and experiences that so strongly affect our lives and the world around us. Whether they are our own or surrogate grandparents who fill some of the gaps in our mobile society, our senior generation also provides our society a link to our national heritage and traditions.”<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. McQuade was the grandmother of forty-three grandchildren and fifteen great-grandchildren. From 1970 until her death on September 26, 2008, she tirelessly advocated for senior citizen rights and to make every day *Grandparents Day*.

Incorporating a celebration of Grandparents, Seniors and Elders into liturgical life allows God’s people to celebrate the theology of legacy, the willing bequest of a predecessor’s most prized spiritual, historical, emotional, material, and physical divinely-bestowed possessions to a willing successor for the purposes of increasing God’s impact in the life of the predecessor and successor, and in the world.<sup>3</sup>

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Zechariah 8:3-6**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter**

Grandparenthood is one of the greatest joys of life. Grandparents can freely express unconditional love and care for their grandchildren without the tensions, nervousness, and stresses of being a parent. For grandchildren, grandparents are a symbol of freedom, unreserved love, legacy, and hope. Likewise, those who are not biological grandparents, but who through their love, patience, wisdom and concern have shepherded so many, have also created amazing legacies

Although my maternal grandparents died before I was born, two of my maternal great-grandparents lived until my teen years. Their impact on me was larger than life. They shared a rich legacy filled with spirituality, stories, self-respect, weird foods, and fried hair. I loved them. Then there was the cuddly bear, my paternal granddaddy. I have wonderful memories of him; memories of love, hope, and security. Memories similar to those my son is creating with his grandparents and great-grandparents. As an adult, I gained my husband’s grandparents, who brought a new wonder into my life.

I was unaware of National Grandparents Day until my son was born eight years ago. The day allowed me to formally honor the rich ministry of grandparenthood, celebrate the theology of legacy across five living generations, and to witness the bond of the “grandparents club.” It also allowed me to honor those seniors and elders who were not related to me but have been a major presence in my life.

A healthy relationship among grandparents and grandchildren and among elders and youth and young adults defy and breathe hope on the problems that plague our society: the roaring rates of HIV/AIDS among youth and seniors, homelessness, abuse among our most vulnerable populations, economic decline, and education and health disparities.

However, one cannot overlook the sadness among our elders because of elder abuse, drug addiction, death, and estrangement. Seniors, Elders and Grandparents Day affords the Church the opportunity to raise awareness and impact the social issues that affect our sages.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The text is part of a compilation of sermons and visions under the name of Zechariah, a postexilic priest and prophet<sup>5</sup> and contemporary of Haggai and Ezra. He was most likely the son of Berechiah and grandson of Iddo, a priest named among the returning exiles in Nehemiah 12:4.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars have identified two distinctive parts of Zechariah, chapters 1-8 and 9-14 written in different time periods and by different authors, with most agreeing to Zechariah as author of the first section. The first part of the book is estimated to have been written during the reign of Darius, king of Persia possibly from 520 to 518 BCE. King Darius, like the two Persian kings before him, practiced religious tolerance and repatriated the exiles to Judah. Zechariah's audience is an impoverished and dispirited community.<sup>7</sup> There has been much upheaval up to this point, empires have risen and fallen, and oppressors have merely changed names. Efforts by the exiles to rebuild Jerusalem have waxed and waned, mostly due to the exclusion of people of the land in the community organizing and rebuilding efforts.

Chapters 7-8 compose the final messages, framing a series of eight visions in part one of the book. The people inquired of their obligation to fast four times a year since the fall of Jerusalem. To which Zechariah responds, the true obligation is authentic divine worship. He understands their underlying fear of another misstep. However, the message is clear, like the meaning of Zechariah's name, "YHWH remembers" and will keep the promises to the people of YHWH. He reminds them that the historical events leading up to and the return from the exile are part of YHWH's sovereign purpose. YHWH will faithfully deliver the LORD'S people from exile, and restore Jerusalem and the people's relationship with their God. In an exercise in visualization, Zechariah poetically lays out the promise.

In verse 3, the verb form of "to return" promises the LORD's expediency and magnificence. According to the book of Ezekiel, YHWH had abandoned Jerusalem. However, YHWH's return to the site of the tabernacle with the LORD's people is a glorious return.<sup>8</sup> It is as if God promises them, "I will quickly reestablish my presence in my earthly home.<sup>9</sup> I will tabernacle in the heart of Jerusalem. Jerusalem will be renamed by me, in a glorious renaming ceremony, the faithful city. A city that is stable and dependable. And I the LORD, the Commander-in-Chief, will have the exclusive rights of my mountain, of my people. The city will experience my impact and it will be a sustainable city that is able to be holy, set apart for my purposes."

The overall health and stability of any society is measured by many social indicators. Today, we use statistics such as the infant mortality rate, urban population size, food production per capita, labor force rates (employment, income disparities, etc.), school enrollment, number of cases of particular diseases, teen suicide or pregnancy rates, crime rates, poverty rates, health care costs, and voter turnout numbers to provide information on social conditions over time. In vv 4-5, the LORD keeps it real simple. No statistician or sociologists are needed. The LORD has Zechariah take a snapshot of the age groups. How are the elderly faring? Are the children developing across gender and age groups?

Under the LORD'S new national strategy, Jerusalem is restored. The presence of young and old reflects a full repopulation of the city. In this city, seniors and children, men and women, are equal citizens. The elderly advance in years. They do not have to fear crime and elder abuse, and can again sit in public, at the city gate in open spaces. They are not trapped in their homes or institutions. The open areas near the gate reflect forward thinking city planning. The municipalities have planned for youth and elderly to have recreational areas.

The city has a quality health care system, one without disparities. The adults live quite long, and male and female children live beyond childbirth and infancy. Teen suicide is low because the children advance to older adulthood. There is food for the masses for no one is languishing in the streets or in their homes. In my sanctified imagination, young adults to middle age adults are not loitering the streets, because they are working, earning living wages and equal pay for equal work. The economy is stable so the elderly are relieved of labor,<sup>10</sup> usually necessary in an agrarian society. National security is working effectively, and the country is at peace because there are children and elderly in the streets not armed soldiers. In this portrait, there is no generation gap. The very old and the young share the city without fear of each other.

This vision may seem far-fetched to the survivors who witnessed and experienced the impact of the devastation, who know how governmental systems operate, felt hunger, endured inadequate health care and education, and doggedly labored. However, YHWH injects hope to the dejected. YHWH'S presence promises a positive, definitive, and swift impact on the city. YHWH puts the rhetorical questions to the remnant, literally the "rest of the people," to provoke a new vision of Jerusalem in their eyes, and revive hope in the gaze of those who are in despair.

Prayer: YHWH dwells in the midst of our homes, cities, towns, and countries. For we know that when you dwell in the midst, we will share our most prized possessions with each other to increase your impact in the world. We see hope in our cities. We celebrate the love and legacy of seniors, elders and grandparents today. Amen.

## **Celebration**

Imagine a world that is safe for all people; a world in which our most vulnerable populations experience the fullness of security. Dream of a country restored of its hope amongst its diverse citizens. Imagine a country stimulated by healthy relationships among our most seasoned and earliest learners. Visualize a city indwelt by the presence of YHWH. YHWH dwelling in a city has the power to fill the streets with the laughter of the very young and very old. YHWH tabernacling in any city will scale the generation gap in each family.

## Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

**Sounds:** The soft crescendo of the rumbling of thunder over the mountain as YHWH returns to dwell in Jerusalem (v. 3); banter of old friends, shuffling of feet and the soft thud of a walking stick (v. 4); children’s laughter echoing along the walls; the constant thud of a bouncing ball, girls and boys unreservedly laughing as they perform skits before the elders (v. 5);

**Sights:** Billowing clouds almost as thick as a fog settling on the city as YHWH dwells (v. 3); the hush of the crowd as they stand in amazement as they see what YHWH sees (v. 6); and

**Smells:** The odor of musk from a full day of play in the sunshine (v. 5).

## Notes

1. “National Grandparents Day.” National Grandparents Day Council. Online location: <http://www.grandparents-day.com/> accessed 3 October 2008
2. President Jimmy Carter. “National Grandparents Day Proclamation.” Online location: <http://www.grandparents-day.com/html/history/history1-nv2.html> accessed 3 October 2008
3. Refer to Genesis 48 and Heb. 11:21; John 20:19-23, and 2 Kings 2:1-18
4. “Zechariah.” Encyclopedia Judaica. 2nd Ed. Vol. 21: WEL-ZY. USA: Thomas Dale and Jerusalem: Ketez Publishing House, LTD, 2007. p. 484
5. “The Book of Zechariah.” The Speaker’s Bible: the Minor Prophets. Ed. Edward Hastings and James Hastings. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1962. p.179
6. Carson, D. A “Zechariah.” New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994. p. 863
7. Interpretersdictionary.org accessed 15 October 2008
8. Smith, Ralph, Ed. “Zechariah.” Word Biblical Commentary. Vol. 32: Micah – Malachi. Waco, TX: Word Book, 1984. p. 232
9. Refer to Psalm 132:13-14
10. Myers, Carol L. and Eric M. Myers. “Haggai, Zechariah 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary.” The Anchor Bible. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987. p. 415

## III. Recommendations

- **There are numerous intergenerational activities to engage the congregation in anticipation for Seniors, Elders and Grandparents Day:**
  - a. Highlight and provide workshops on issues facing grandparents: rearing grandchildren, drug addiction, HIV/AIDS, homelessness, understanding health care benefits, elder abuse, estrangement, long distance grand parenting, etc.;
  - b. Have children and youth send hand-written letters to their grandparents and surrogate grandparents;

- c. Incorporate activities for Seniors, Elders and Grandparents Day into Christian education ministries;
  - d. Conduct “Forget-Me-Not Visitations” (visit nursing homes), and develop an ongoing visitation program;
  - e. Have members of the youth and children ministries distribute flowers to elderly members who are home-bound;
  - f. Create and distribute a booklet of poetry that contains intergenerational contributions;
  - g. Have grandparents and surrogate grandparents create a scrapbook or storybook of their childhood for their grandchildren;
  - h. Identify milestones among members of your congregations: most number of grandchildren, length of legacy (grand, great-grand, great-great, etc.) and display the legacy on-screen during a service or on posters throughout the church;
  - i. Create and distribute grandparent pins or pins to all elders in your church;
  - j. Create a video log with expressions of gratitude, poetry, from parents to their grandparents and or their surrogate grandparents;
  - k. Include skits about grandparents and surrogate grandparents in puppet, dance or drama ministries; and
  - l. Get digital picture frames for grandparents whose grandchildren live long distances away so that they can digitally “visit” their grandchildren.
- **Resources for additional information**

### **Websites**

- (a) Grandparents-day.org
- (b) The Foundation for Grandparenting. Online location:  
<http://www.grandparenting.org/>
- (c) Grandparents Magazine. Online location:  
<http://www.grandparentsmagazine.net>

### **Organizations**

- (a) Your local Department of Aging
- (b) AARP formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons

### **Books**

- (a) Ruiz, Dorothy S. Amazing Grace: African American Grandmothers As Caregivers and Conveyers of Traditional Values. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004.
- (b) Gellman, Marc, and Harry Bliss. And God Cried, Too: A Kid's Book of Healing and Hope. New York, NY: HarperTrophy, 2002.
- (c) Uslander, Arlene, and Freddie Levin. That's What Grandparents Are For. Columbus, NC: Peel Productions, 2002.

- (d) Mead, Lucy. Grandparents Are Special: A Tribute to Those Who Love, Nurture & Inspire. New York, NY: Gramercy Books, 2000.
- (e) Fays, Edward, and Jo Anne Metsch. The Grandparents' Treasure Chest: A Journal of Memories to Share with Your Grandchildren. New York, NY: Warner Books, 2002.
- (f) Canfield, Jack, and Mark Victor Hansen. Chicken Soup for the Soul: Grand and Great: Grandparents and Grandchildren Share Their Stories of Love and Wisdom. Deerfield Beach, FL: Chicken Soup for the Soul Publishers, 2008.

### **Stories about Elders and Grandparents**

- (a) Woodson, Jacqueline, and Floyd Cooper. Sweet, Sweet Memory. New York, NY: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children, 2000.
- (b) Dilz, Ric. My Grandma Could Do Anything! Boulder, CO: Rein Designs, 2004.
- (c) Holman, Sandy Lynne, and Lela Kometiani. Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad? Davis, CA: Culture Coop, 1995.
- (d) Hamm, Diane Johnston. Daughter of Suqua. Morton Grove, IL: A. Whitman, 1997.
- (e) Pak, Soyung, and Susan Kathleen Hartung. Dear Juno. New York, NY: Viking, 1999.
- (f) Christensen, Bonnie. In My Grandmother's House: Award-Winning Authors Tell Stories About Their Grandmothers. New York, NY: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2003.
- (g) Williams, Vera B. "More More More" Said the Baby: 3 Love Stories. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books, 1990. A darling child of African heritage is adored as his white Grandma's "Little Pumpkin." Also features single-race families. Inclusive in tone and content for ages 2-up.
- (h) Billingsley, Franny. Well Wished. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1997.
- (i) Strete, Craig. The World in Grandfather's Hands. New York, NY: Clarion Books, 1995.