



# Eco-Justice Ministries

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## Progress Toward Shalom

Selections from Zechariah 8:1-17 (see final page)  
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### INTRODUCTION

In election years, public opinion polls often ask a standardized question: Do you think the country headed in the right direction? Because all the poll-takers use the same wording, their responses can be compared with each other, and across the years.

A compilation of survey results from just before the 2012 election, about 30% of the people saying we're headed in the right direction, and 61% answering that we're on the wrong track.

The answers aren't very revealing. The ones who say yes, we're going in the right direction, obviously share the same values and goals. But folk with wildly different perspectives can, and do, think the country's on the wrong track. The Green Party and the Tea Party don't agree about much of anything, except that we're going in the wrong direction.

The people doing those short telephone polls can't ask the more significant question: What direction do you think we *should* be going? Most people being surveyed would have a very hard time answering, and the statisticians would have fits trying to categorize the answers. There would be an incredible variety of responses about what direction constitutes "progress."

A similar question could be asked in a survey of Christians. Theologically – from your perspective of faith – are we headed in the right direction? As congregations or denominations, in our local communities and as a nation, even as a global society, are we headed in the right direction? Are we making progress toward the right sort of goals?

I think we'd find the same sort of responses and difficulties that show up in the political polling. Lots of people would have a gut feeling about whether or not we're on the right track, and many of them would have a very hard time describing just what those goals should look like.

Now, I'm inclined to believe that there is never just one faithful answer to any question. The rich diversity of perspectives that are found in scripture, and our faith traditions, and in our churches remind us of multiple kinds of truth that deserve respect and consideration.

So I'm not going to tell you *the* answer to "where should we be going?" But this morning I will offer *an* answer – one with very deep roots, and one that offers us great hope. It is the answer that is absolutely right for *me*.

The perspective that I'm naming about the right direction for our churches and our world sits at the very heart of the work that I do through Eco-Justice Ministries, where we nurture church leaders toward faithful ways of addressing ecological health and social justice.

So here's the answer from my perspective: **we should be headed toward God's *shalom* – toward God's realm of peace with justice that includes all of creation.** That should be our goal.

Having answered a complex theological and political question in one word, I could just sit down, or I could open it up for a conversation. But I have a hunch that it might be helpful for me to flesh out the meaning of that Hebrew word.

UCC biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote a whole book on the topic, but he summed it up nicely in two sentences: "Shalom is the substance of the biblical vision of one community embracing all creation. It refers to all those joyous resources and factors which make communal harmony joyous and effective."

### **A VISION OF THE SHALOM COMMUNITY: ZECHARIAH**

The hope and promise of shalom runs all through the Bible. In the New Testament, it meshes very closely with the theme of the kingdom of God. The most vivid image of shalom that I've found, though, comes from the prophet Zechariah.

Let's walk quickly through this wonderful and little known text. This passage is never used in the Revised Common Lectionary. Because most people have never read it, it has the ability to surprise and delight us with fresh insights and new images. I love to do Bible study sessions on it.

This passage from Zechariah is one of hope for people who were deeply discouraged. It comes from about 2,500 years ago – 500 years before Jesus. Jerusalem had been conquered by foreign powers, and the leaders were sent to exile in Babylon. Eventually, they came home to a city in ruins, with no functioning social structure, no temple. Their attempts to rebuild and re-establish the city were long, hard and frustrating.

In the pared-down version of 17 verses that we heard this morning, there's a promise that the people's hard work at restoration would succeed. But even more than that, they are promised that they would see God's peace, God's shalom, restored in their city. When you trim out the prophet-talk – the "thus says the Lord" – Zechariah's vision of peace comes through in 9 or 10 sentences of vivid description.

Other prophets have more dramatic images of shalom. Isaiah has that stuff about the lion and the lamb lying down together in a completely restructured creation where there is no violence of any kind. But Zechariah's description is more immediate and worldly. He's painting a picture of what Jerusalem could look like in just a few years.

He was speaking to people in a ruined city, but the characteristics of shalom also sound like good news to us in our powerful and affluent land. Zechariah still describes an attractive and enticing model for the good life. What does it have to say?

- Jerusalem will be a faithful city, with God dramatically present. This is holy stuff. The signs of shalom are indicators of a community living in right relationship with God.
- The streets are full of old men and old women, boys and girls playing. To a city in collapse, it is remarkable for folk to live to old age. There is food and family support sufficient to care for those who can't work. Infant mortality is low, and kids don't have to be working in the fields – they can play and be joyous. It is a city that can sustain those who may be helpless and vulnerable, young and old. And note some phrasing that slides by our modern ears, but is a remarkable detail stressed by the prophet. Men and women, boys and girls – this is a gender-inclusive society, and girls and women are out in public.
- The people in Jerusalem will be safe from foreign enemies. They won't be a military powerhouse or the center of a new empire, but they will be safe. Peace will be present.
- The language gets a bit convoluted here, but Zechariah reminds his people that when the task of rebuilding the temple started, the city was desperately poor. There were no wages for people or animals – I love that line! It shows that the farm animals and the beasts of burden were seen as part of the community, deserving wages for their work, and subject to considerations of justice. And when the city is that poor, the streets are not safe, with robbery and violence. In the time of God's shalom, the economy will be healthy, and there won't be that sort of dangerous poverty. There will be wages for people and animals.
- There will be a sowing of peace, literally a sowing of shalom, and that shows up in a flourishing natural world, with good crops and sufficient rain, and the people of Jerusalem will be able to keep their crops – their harvest won't go to a foreign power or a conquering army.
- And when the people live properly in this city of peace, the legal system will be fair, free from fraud and deception.

What good news for the people trying to rebuild Jerusalem. And what good news for us, as we see the qualities of a community – or a world – living God's peace.

When I work through this text with a class or workshop group, I ask, “what else do we need for the good life that isn't described by Zechariah?” We usually find that there is nothing to add, nothing more that we need to live in peace and joy.

God's shalom it isn't about our having big screen TVs and designer fashions. The good life isn't dependent on living in a nation that is the world's superpower.

The good life is in a community that has enough to care for all of its members, that is safe from major threats, that is economically sufficient, that is in harmony with the natural world, and that embodies justice for all.

It is important for us to see that the qualities of shalom are present in the community, in the collective life of the people and animals, in the flourishing of nature. The promise of shalom isn't given to individuals. It isn't about personal wealth, or private joy, or individual honor. Shalom is about the common good, about the welfare of all the folk together.

According to very old and very important themes in our Judeo-Christian faith tradition, those are the qualities that define progress. As people who have made a commitment to God, I'd say that we're on the right track when we are trying to make progress toward God's shalom.

### **A VISION OF SHALOM – NOT A ROADMAP**

Zechariah gives us an enticing taste of shalom, of godly peace and justice. He gives us vivid descriptions of community life, challenging notions of compassionate and generous life.

But the prophet is not specific at all on the sort of policies and programs that are necessary to get us there. We don't hear any details about a health care system that will let people live to old age, or the ways of distributing food to all, or labor laws that will be fair and just. And maybe that's why his vision of shalom is so attractive.

There are lots of ways that we might get to shalom. As faithful people, we can disagree on the “how” of ethical and just living – and we often do! But however we might try to get there, the vision of faith calls us in a certain direction, toward particular goals, and hopefully we can agree about those.

Shalom is a guiding vision for whether we're going in the right direction. It lets us know if we're making "progress" with our personal choices, in church programs, and with social policies.

Poet and humorist Ogden Nash said, "There has been lots of progress during my lifetime, but I'm afraid it's heading in the wrong direction."

"Progress" going the wrong way is not progress, no matter what the politicians or business pages say. But we can't know if we are going in the right direction, we can't know if we're making progress, without a clear vision. Shalom is the measure we use.

When looking at a personal choice, when looking at a law or policy, when looking at a social trend, ask: Will this bring us closer to shalom? Will it increase justice and peace, will this add to community and compassion, will this increase sustainability?

Put in those terms, we can see that our vision of shalom is counter-cultural. It stands against the dominant values and many of the pervasive trends of the world.

- It rejects the growing gap between rich and poor
- It rejects the increasing destruction of the environment
- It decries the increase in individualism and the breakdown of community

But shalom also tells us when things are going in the right direction:

- It celebrates the development of technologies and practices that help us live more sustainably
- It affirms the spread of basic health care into communities around the world
- It supports steps toward cooperation and disarmament among nations

A wise theologian has given a succinct definition of the term "eco-justice" that is part of my agency's name. Bill Gibson said that eco-justice is "the well-being of all humankind on a thriving Earth." That's the same sort of vision that was expressed by Zechariah, and that runs through the theme of shalom. It is a vision that calls us away from inequality, exploitation and pollution. It calls us toward community, justice and ecological health.

### **CONCLUSION**

"Are we on the right track?" is not just a common question for political polling. It is an important question for all of us.

It is important to recognize that there are many definitions of progress, many notions of "the right track", in our society. For some, it is about personal liberty, or economic prosperity. For others -- who often use the "progressive" label -- it is tied to matters of social justice and economic equity, or to open-mindedness and inclusivity. Some of my friends in the environmental movement look for progress in ways of reducing pollution and being more sustainable.

There are lots of definitions of progress, and we have to decide what we mean when we try to be on the right track.

Shalom – peace, justice and harmony for all of God's creation – is an excellent guideline to see if we're on the right track, to see if we're making progress in working toward the realm of God. And, in secular settings, shalom identifies the qualities that we can use to see if our society is going in the right direction.

Shalom grounds us in our deep, historic faith. It calls us to relevance and engagement with what is really going on in the world.

This morning, I invite you to grab hold of that vision of shalom. Get caught up in the vivid images of peace, justice and ecological health from Zechariah. See how good it feels to be tugged toward the realm of God, and to see the qualities of God's peace embodied in real communities.

I invite you to claim shalom as the vision for being on the right track, and to let that vision shape our lives together.

## Selections from Zechariah 8:1-17 NRSV

The word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying:

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.

Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.

I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.

For before those days there were no wages for people or for animals, nor was there any safety from the foe for those who went out or came in, and I set them all against one other. But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, says the LORD of hosts. For there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things.

These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the LORD.