

November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018

*Next Sunday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December, is the first Sunday of Advent. In my house growing up, that means eating Thanksgiving leftovers while putting up the Christmas tree. Advent, followed by Christmas is my favorite season of the year. Each year we would put out a manger scene with shepherds, wise men, Mary and Joseph, and a donkey or two. Though inaccurate in many of its details, the scene tells a powerful story, providing a sentiment that gets us thinking about the Incarnation (God becoming flesh).*

As a symbol of hope, the manger scene reminds us of Jeremiah's powerful prophecy delivered many years before Jesus' birth. His message was one of hope for the Jews—hope for the coming of their promised Messiah, which meant that the Jewish nation would be delivered from oppression.:

*Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness." (Jeremiah 33:14-16, ESV)*

Hope is a powerful emotion, and it's the theme for today. Unfortunately, hope is often trivialized in our culture. We are told: Don't lose hope! Keep hope alive! H.O.P.E.—*Have Only Positive Expectations*. We find the word hope emblazoned on cross-stitch samplers and pillows. I've heard that on a TV show written by an outspoken atheist, the hero declares, "I don't pray. I hope." In our culture, hope has become a buzzword—almost a magical word. It's just one of those things you say: Go get your hope on! We hear it in so many contexts that the word seems to have lost any significance. It's like white noise in our ears. We are almost tone-deaf to it.

But in the book of Jeremiah, including our reading today, hope is profoundly important. It was written at a time when hope was in short supply. Jeremiah himself was involved in many less-than-hopeful situations, including the devastation of Jerusalem by the armies of Babylon, his imprisonment at the command of the king of Judah, and being kidnapped at midnight by a group of rebels. When Jeremiah shares what God says about hope, you can be assured it had great personal meaning for him. Jeremiah sees hope as something essential to survival—his view of hope is tough, enduring and vital. Today we'll see how Jeremiah views hope in three ways: 1) hope in season, 2) hope in action, and 3) hope within hope.

## Hope in season

Jeremiah had one of the most brutal careers of all of God's prophets. Called "the weeping prophet," he spent most of his career telling the people of Judah that judgment was coming upon them due to their sins, which included idolatry along with mistreatment of the poor, the widows and disabled people. Jeremiah's preaching made him very unpopular with the people of Judah, particularly its king, Zedekiah, who tried to silence Jeremiah by imprisoning him. Now, instead of running through the city of Jerusalem pointing out everything that was wrong, Jeremiah was limited to preaching by correspondence. It's ironic that it was during this imprisonment, when Jeremiah likely lamented that he could no longer do the work of God, he was led by God to pen the words of hope we read in chapter 33.

Here's a question: Have you ever felt imprisoned by circumstances? At such trying times has God sent you words of hope? Perhaps it was a passage of Scripture, or a phone call, or a card from a loved one. It may have been a sermon, or the lyrics to a song. Hope is found primarily in Jesus, the Savior of the world. We find great hope knowing that he has come, is coming now by the Spirit, and will come again to set all things right. Because of Jesus, we know that this life is not all that there is. We know that the pain, sorrow, trial and even death we experience on this side of Jesus' return are temporary. When Jesus returns, he will do what is just and right.

Just a few chapters before this prophecy of hope, God said this through Jeremiah to the Jewish elders held captive in Babylon:

*I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jer. 29:11)*

Like the elders in exile, Jeremiah was locked away. Outside the prison, the city was burning. He likely could hear the screams of the victims. All seemed hopeless. But God gave him a message that restored his hope:

*In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. (Jer. 33:15)*

Perhaps Jeremiah was familiar with the similar words spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord. (Isa. 11:1-2)*

The Hebrew word translated *stump* is *netser*. It likely refers to a gnarled old grape vine that has been cut down to the roots—just a stump left. The promise is that this gnarled, old, seemingly lifeless stump will send out a new shoot—new growth, new hope. *Netser* became the name of a town you're familiar with: Netseret—we know it as Nazareth. From out of Nazareth (the old stump) came Jesus—Jesus of Nazareth. He came in the midst of devastation, a time when all hope seemed gone. He came not only bearing a message of hope, but he was, in himself, the Hope of not only Israel, but of all humanity.

Jeremiah's prophecy tells Israel that there is cause for hope. It's also a message for us—one that should give us hope. We too can trust God to bring us through even the worst seasons in life. No matter how great the difficulties we're going through, we know they are not the final word. We know this because we know WHO controls the seasons of life. We know WHO brings resurrection—WHO restores life to what seems dead, what seems without hope. Advent reminds us of *hope in season*. It reassures us that Jesus is coming again as King of kings and Lord of lords.

## Hope in action

Advent also tells us about *hope in action*. Before Jeremiah gave his hope-filled messianic prophecy, we learn in Jer. 32:6-15, that God told Jeremiah to buy a parcel of land in Judah at the very time the country was being invaded by the Babylonians. God then told Jeremiah that his land would be stolen, then destroyed. Granted, the land had a rock-bottom price, but who in their right mind buys land in the midst of an invasion? From a human perspective, doing so makes no sense. Yet Jeremiah did what God told him to do. He bought the land, then gave the deed to his servant Baruch for safekeeping. Jeremiah was taking part in a revolutionary act of hope. This was *hope in action*.

What does hope in action look like for us? What actions are we taking that say we play by different rules—ones set out by the ultimate Ruler? Jeremiah bought a piece of land he had never seen and in a turbulent time. He did so, confident that God had a good reason for what he was asking. Is that how we live? I think it is. Let me give you a couple of examples:

- Every week when we choose to give offerings at church. By this act of generosity, we declare that our hope is in God, not in wealth. We are saying that God is in charge of our finances.
- Every day, we choose to love people (including those closest to us). Instead of reacting in anger when they frustrate or disappoint us, we choose to share in God's love for them, a love based not on what they do, but on who they are—God's beloved.

These are just two examples of hope in action—the hope of Advent. In what ways is God asking you to put hope into action in your life? Perhaps what he is asking you to do makes

no sense right now, but can you choose to obey him anyway? Doing so is what keeping your eyes on the kingdom of God is all about, keeping your eyes fixed on Jesus—on the reality of his life, death, resurrection, ascension and on the promise of his return. That is hope in action.

## Hope within hope

And then there is hope within hope:

*Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness." (Jeremiah 33:14-16, ESV)*

When one man was asked to describe his feeling of anticipation at the arrival of the headline act at a music concert he wrote:

*The first "real" concert I attended had 40,000 people in a football stadium to hear the rock group U2. It was the summer of 1992, I was 15 years old. I remember it vividly—from getting our Doc Martins on, to fighting our way to our seats, to jumping over a fence to get back to the car before we were crushed by the crowd. It was amazing. They were one of my favorite bands and continue to be—they still have the old magic. But for a suburban teenager, this was about as close to heaven as I'd ever felt.*

*The concert producers knew what they were doing. There had been three opening acts, all leaving us aching to see Bono jump up on stage to do his thing. The stage was rigged with hundreds of TVs; it was quite a display, especially 25 years ago. The last of the opening acts finished and the screen went dark. Then a flicker on one screen. Then on another. A cascade of images and sounds and color. Then dark again. Then all the screens went off at once—then black. Then a news anchor over here, then Martin Luther King over here, then a video of the Hollywood sign. Finally, a bank of over 100 screens flashed to life. Finally, one huge image of George W. Bush, who was president at the time, dubbed over to say: "We will rock you. We will rock you." In front of him the shadow of the great rock and roller—BONO! The lights went up and there's the whole band and the show begins! And the crowd goes wild! There's this little flickering in the dark, just a hint. A note played on a guitar, a drumbeat. Then suddenly, there he is.*

In a way, Advent is like that—it's a season of *anticipation*. We light the candles, read the scriptures, sing the songs, all in anticipation of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Advent

Season spans the four Sundays prior to Christmas Day. It's a replay, in miniature, of the grand drama of God and humanity. It's the "sacred romance" of God and people—his pursuit of us and finally our coming home to him.

The *righteous Branch* mentioned here in Jeremiah did indeed spring up from David. The great, promised King did come. He is the Prophet of prophets and the Priest of priests. Yet he didn't come like we thought he would—he didn't destroy, he didn't end it all, nor did he build heaven on earth. He didn't vindicate just one nation from just one circumstance in just one time—his mission extended much further and deeper than that. Jesus came as the Savior of all humanity—he came, he comes and will come again to save humanity from its worst ruler—*ourselves*. He came as a baby born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, he comes now through the Spirit, and one day he will come again bodily to earth in tremendous power and mercy.

These "comings" (advent) of the eternal Son of God become human—is our *hope within hope*. We have hope today because we have the ultimate hope for the ultimate tomorrow. Spoiler alert: *The good guys win!*

We can live in hope because we live in capital H—HOPE. All we have now, no matter how good, is not as good as it gets. Conversely, all the bad we've experience up to now is not life's final answer, it does not define us:

- The parent who mistreated or ignored you does not establish your identity. Because of the advent of Jesus, you are the chosen child of God who God has loved since before the world began.
- The job you lost did not define you—your identity didn't disappear when your job did. You are called of God to participate in the spread of his kingdom today and to worship forever in the courts of the King.
- The lover who never came, or the one who broke your heart, did not define you forever as lonely or rejected. You are the beloved of God, the bride of Christ, pursued forever by the great romantic.
- The sickness or accident, or the aging that destroyed your body, does not define you. You are the dancer, the beautiful creation of God who will forever walk upright in the Lord's presence, and by his side.

But how does having this identity and the hope it brings change our everyday lives? The answer is that the God who is the Source of our hope is the *ultimate* and *final* word on us and our circumstances. Knowing that, trusting in that, changes every moment in our lives today.

Praise God, the shoot did come up from Jesse—the branch did come out of Nazareth. Jesus did come, he is coming now, and will come again. Let us live our lives in the light of that truth: *Hope in season. Hope in action. Hope within hope.*