

The Righteous Branch is Coming

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Last week, Pastor Clay ended the church year by asking the question, “If Jesus is King, why is the world such a mess?” Certainly, an apt question given the state of the world in which we currently live. Today, the first Sunday in Advent, we begin a new year in the church calendar, and today’s Scripture reading answers the question, “The world is such a mess, where is the promised King?”

Before the verses we read today were first spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, he found himself confined in the courtyard of the guard in the royal palace of Judah. He was so confined because his previous prophecy was not a popular one with the king. At that time, the nation of Judah was under siege by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

Jeremiah spoke God’s word saying that Judah would fall and that things would get worse before they would get better. There would be total destruction, Jerusalem would be burned to the ground and no humans or animals would inhabit what was once a vibrant land.

Still under guard in the royal palace of Judah, Jeremiah spoke another prophecy, which we read today. This second prophecy sounds much different from the first that foretold the destruction of the Holy City and its Temple. He invites his listeners to envision the future of their nation and it’s not a vision of death and destruction. This was likely a stretch

for his countrymen to understand as they were dealing with starvation and continued attacks from the enemy's forces.

Into what would have seemed a world gone mad, Jeremiah points to the good that is coming. I have no doubt that the people of Jeremiah's day, eager as they were for things to get better, focused more on what life was like before the siege rather than trying to envision *any* kind of life after the siege. This is reminiscent of the stories from the Exodus, where the wandering Israelites longed to go back to the place of slavery simply because it was familiar. Unable to see a new and different future for themselves in the Promised Land, they clung to memories of another way of life.

Jeremiah speaks to a people in dire circumstances that God is still at work and tells them that they are still His people. This message is meant to give them hope in the middle of what seems a totally hopeless situation. That hope would have to carry them through 70 years of exile in a foreign land.

God had made a promise that he would keep, even if not visible at the time. "The days are surely coming," Jeremiah preaches. He shares God's words of comfort offering a hope and a future to a people with no visible hope left. They are called to believe that in God's timing, His Will shall come to pass.

This promise may have been difficult for them to hear. It had been centuries since David had been king. In the ensuing years, his progeny had not always upheld the righteousness they had been called to by God. The nation would not be under siege if they had! Yet here was Jeremiah saying that the righteous sprout would still come from the line of David. That this king would be just and do what is right, not like the kings they had known who had fallen away from God. How the people wanted to believe that Jeremiah's words could be true! But first hardship would be their lot.

Today, thousands of years after Jeremiah spoke these prophecies, we know that his word is true. Here in the season of Advent we celebrate the coming of that righteous branch from the line of David, Jesus the Christ. Jesus was a righteous man. He was not a self-righteous man, like many leaders we see in our world today. He did not possess an inflated ego, full of himself, but rather a humble spirit living a life of just relationships and love with his fellow man. A spirit willing to be sacrificed for the benefit of others. Jesus is to serve as our example of how to live in a world not all that different from the one that both he and Jeremiah lived in. Still today there are wars and violence, crushing poverty existing alongside obscene wealth, and indifference to the suffering of others throughout the world.

Like the people of Jeremiah's day, we are living in the "now and not yet". Judah under siege was not yet totally lost, however the nobles and

upper classes had already been taken into exile or executed. In our world we see struggles to initiate social justice and Creation care. Although some progress is being made, we still have far to go. Now and not yet. At the first Christmas, Jesus came to initiate the kingdom of God on earth, yet that kingdom is not yet fully come.

The celebration of Advent is a renewal of the anticipation experienced by the people of Judah in the time of the prophets. Jeremiah and Isaiah both spoke often of the hope that awaited those who believed in God's promises. Today we lit the first Advent candle, the candle of hope. Just as the prophets called the ancient Israelite people to hope in the promised Messiah, so even now are we called to wait in hope for the coming of Jesus. We wait expectantly, just as they did, for the arrival of that righteous ruler who will restore peace throughout all of God's kingdom.

But our waiting is not inactive. We are not to just sit, staring out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus coming in the clouds. NO! In the "now" of God's kingdom we are to practice the instructions of the prophet Micah when he said:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God.

Now as in ancient times our hope is in God. The fulfillment of our hope might not happen tomorrow, or next year, as two years in a pandemic has taught us. But we are not to give up hope, because God *will* fulfill his promise to his people.

The righteous branch *will* come to restore hope for peace on earth. In the meantime, trusting in God's provision for us in the past, we are to imagine what the fulfillment of his promises will look like in the future. We are to continue to act as agents of God in the "now" to prepare for that day when the "not yet" will finally arrive. On that glorious day, every knee on earth will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Come, Lord Jesus!

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