

“God’s Promise”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 1, 2019

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 122

Jeremiah 33:14-18

If you visit the city of Jerusalem – as I had the opportunity to do with some of you several years ago – it is impossible not to notice the tenuous interplay between the different religions represented there: Jewish, Christian and Islam. Each of these faith traditions claim different holy sites for celebrations and therefore must be willing to respectfully accommodate the other two and compromise about when, where and how these will take place. And at each – whether the Jewish Wailing Wall, or the Muslim Dome of the Rock, or the Upper Room for Christians, for example – you can sense the holiness of the divine. Jerusalem is a place where God has been and even now powerfully present.

And yet the history of Jerusalem is also filled with layer upon layer of destruction and rebuilding as, over many centuries, the people of these faith traditions – as well as the empires and nations that have surrounded them – have fought to conquer and control this hilltop fortress. Too many wars to even name have been waged over Jerusalem; peace has not often lasted long.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks during a period of complex international relations in and around the city of Jerusalem which included a fraught alliance with Egypt, the destruction of the city and its Temple at the hands of the Assyrians, and the exile of many of the city’s residents to Babylon. Jeremiah was jailed by his own king for predicting the coming of such perilous times; and yet, in this passage, we find an amazing promise of future hope. Jerusalem, through God’s forgiveness, would experience the appearance of a righteous branch – coming from the line of King David – and the city and its inhabitants would experience justice and peace.

This new and glorious future will be one in which long-standing desires are revealed, in which God’s hidden face will come gloriously into view, in which justice and righteousness will prevail in and throughout land. The righteousness of God will be manifest in two of Israel’s oldest and most important institutions: the priesthood and the throne.¹ No longer will hostile foreigners rule, nor will the people have to wonder whether they could still worship God in a foreign land. The

¹ Michael Chan from *WorkingPreacher.com*

days are surely coming, God – through Jeremiah – promises, when all things will be set right.

God’s final words for Jeremiah to speak are never hopeless. Again and again, throughout this long book of prophecy, Jeremiah follows predictions of doom and disaster with hints toward a better future. At the beginning of this prophetic vocations, Jeremiah is told that his work will include “plucking up” and “pulling down” as well as “building and planting.” When God directs him to go to the Potter’s House, he sees that the clay in a skillful artisan’s hands can be formed, destroyed, and then shaped again. So it is with God. And then, during the siege of Jerusalem, when the Babylonian armies are poised to take the city, Jeremiah – of all things – purchases a field for future use, claiming by this seemingly foolish act that God was not through with the holy city yet; despite all appearances to the contrary.²

And just as Jeremiah proclaimed that God was not finished with Jerusalem or its exiled residents, we also believe that God is not done with our world, our city, our faith, or – indeed – us. The season of Advent is the time to claim for ourselves the hope that the righteous branch of God will again spring forth; that, in our midst, there will be justice and peace. What we anticipate is the coming of an alternative reality. Advent invites us to name those places in our lives and our world that are presently out-of-sync with the divine vision of righteousness. There may be – and, in many ways, there is – a wide gap between what now is and what we wish were so. And yet, the promise of Advent is that God is our righteousness and, with God’s coming, all things will be made new.³

While Jeremiah envisioned the return of the Davidic monarchy, we look for a different kind of king; what the people of Israel called a Messiah. This would be the one who would come to save: to rescue the people to safety. To a people devastated by exile and loss, Jeremiah’s prophecy for a righteous branch offered hope. All might seem gone, but God is still faithful. The messiah who comes, the one for whom we await in this Advent season, offers salvation not just to Jerusalem, but for the entire world.

A righteous branch will spring up. This is a word of hope, but not naïve hope. Jeremiah is not someone who looks at the world through rose-colored glasses. This is a prophet that was imprisoned by his own government because he

² John Holbert, “The Eternal Promise”

³ Anne Steward from *WorkingPreacher.com*

keeps proclaiming doom. Now, his words of hope are spoken to counteract despair. Power lies therein.

We need these words of hope woven into the fabric of our own reality as we look around us. We may sometimes feel like the trajectory of our world is a dead end, but God says, “no!” At times, we may feel that the bedrock principles of our social fabric and democratic processes are on the verge of crumbling – that this may be the end, but the Word of God says, “no!” At times, we may feel that our relationships, work, health or security are fading, but God’s speaks again with words of righteousness and hope.⁴

During Advent, we proclaim hope despite adverse circumstances. We light candles each week during worship to remind us that God’s light has already entered into the world and that the darkness will never overcome it. We also follow some pattern of waiting and preparation for the birth of Jesus on Christmas. For some, this means opening doors or hanging ornaments, while others choose to follow a daily devotion. One simple idea is to read one chapter of the gospel of Luke each day of December – 24 chapters in all – to remind us of Jesus’ ministry and his teachings about righteousness, justice and peace. Then, when Jesus appears in the manger and we – like the angels, shepherds and magi – come to offer worship and praise, we have fresh in our minds the totality of his message: that we are to be righteous neighbors and servants to all.

On this first Sunday of Advent – aware as we are that there may be much for us to get ready for our celebrations of Christmas – we also pause to be reminded of the simplicity of the nativity of our Lord. Born in a humble stable to seemingly ordinary parents from a backwater town, Christmas was a remarkable event that took place in largely unremarkable circumstances. What is amazing is the long string of prophecies and promises that pointed to the coming of the Lord at that particular time and place. From them, we realize that God has been and continues to be at work in all times and circumstances; that we can make ourselves ready to meet God just as people of faith have been throughout these many centuries. For it is often exactly when our problems are most murky and complex, when the future seems most bleak, that we turn to the word of the Lord – a word of hope – for vision.⁵

A righteous branch will spring up. Jeremiah’s vision for renewal stands in line with the other prophets that have proclaimed a God who recognizes suffering,

⁴ Jon Herrin, “A King & Priest for Us”

⁵ Melinda Ouviaik from *WorkingPreacher.com*

doesn't stay silent, and acts for justice and peace. In Advent, we proclaim that God has acted powerfully in the past and will continue to pursue righteousness in the future; and that, as God's people, we are called to pursue those same goals – intervening on behalf of our neighbors and our world – always maintaining hope that the days are surely coming. Every selfless gift that you offer, every lonely person that you befriend, every intercessory prayer that you offer, every righteous cause that you champion, each of these acts help to proclaim that the days are surely coming; that God has been and is even now at work preparing to put things right.

May God bless you this Advent as you prepare for this coming; waiting expectantly and working to proclaim the promise of new things God is doing in our midst. Amen.