

“God’s Promise: Justice and Righteousness”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger; First Sunday of Advent
Edina Morningside Community Church; December 1, 2019

Jeremiah 33:14-18

The days are surely coming, says 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 live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

For thus says the Lord: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to make grain offerings, and to make sacrifices for all time.

When you imagine the future, what do you feel? When you picture five years from now, or ten, or twenty, what do you see? What will your loved ones be doing? What will this community be like? Do you hope that things will be better than they are right now? Or are you convinced that they will be worse?

I’ve been in conversations recently with folks who are alarmed at where things are at and where they’re headed. Healthy living is more difficult to maintain and more expensive to insure. College is becoming less affordable and less of a sure path to a good-paying job. Our public life seems terribly fractured, ever more at risk from those with money, power or incentive to pit us against one another. The climate is showing the daunting long-term effects of our polluting behavior, and not even the weather is the way it once was. Those who are paying attention to these things are right to be alarmed—these are worrying trends that, if given too much weight, can turn fear into fatalism. It might seem then like there *is* no hope: what will be is already baked in, and there’s nothing to be done about it.

Such resignation to an apparently inevitable future made sense especially in Jeremiah’s day. He lives in Jerusalem just a few years after righteous King Josiah from last week. Josiah heard that Judah would be destroyed after he died, and Jeremiah was around to witness it. This period leading up to the destruction of the temple and the sacking of Jerusalem is among the very worst of any time in Jewish history. At the time of these words of prophecy, the great foreign power Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem for the last year, and about a year hence the city wall will be destroyed and Jerusalem will fall. Being sieged over a year meant starvation, thirst, and no escape for the thousands trapped inside, and deadly violence outside. Jeremiah himself is imprisoned at the bottom of a well within besieged Jerusalem, because he’s declaring God’s prophecy that the city will fall, and that sounds like treason to the city’s leaders. Jeremiah is in the very worst part of his life. It might seem then like there *is* no hope: what will be is already baked in, and there’s nothing to be done about it.

Except, Jeremiah declares God’s promise of fidelity on the other side of loss. “The days are *surely* coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ...I *will* cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he *shall* execute justice and righteousness in the land.” Echoing Isaiah’s prophecy that “a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse”, Jeremiah promises a coming ruler who restores justice and righteousness even after the certain destruction at the hands of Babylon. He promises hope in the face of heartache, hope that looks like a return to faithful communities and a devout leader, hope that restores regular temple sacrifices and practices for good. This is the vision by which Jeremiah seeks to implant hope, convincing those around him that God has not given up on these people or the covenants of faithfulness with their ancestors. God may not save them from the coming flood of disaster, but God will ride it out with them, securing a thriving Judah and Israel on the other side of calamity.

We read Jeremiah’s audacious prophesy on the first Sunday of Advent, reaching for divine hope in a time inclined to despair. Our vision of that future doesn’t look like temple sacrifice restored, but we still

need Jeremiah's assurance of God's promise: that righteousness and justice *will* return, divinely guaranteed. The days are surely coming when lion will lie down with lamb, and nation shall not make war against nation any more. The days are surely coming when God's love will be more revered than fearful division. The days are surely coming when all people will have food to eat, shelter to sleep under, and work that is worthwhile. The days are surely coming, because God is still at work in the world, and Christ will be born among us once more. This is the season of Advent, as we await this coming promised birth and prepare ourselves for its arrival with hope.

There's at least two different forms of hope that come to mind here, though. The first is more akin to wishful thinking than actual hope. It's the romantic escapism of whistling in the dark, of suggesting that it'll all be alright "in the sweet by-and-by when I die", but with no impact "down on the ground while I'm still around"! That form of so-called hope is nothing more than a sleeping pill to quiet the worries of the spirit. The hope of Jeremiah, though, is another kind: hope that equips, empowers and transforms this life in the here and now. In his recent novel, [Chigozie Obioma describes](#) "the peace that concrete hope brings to a man who has suffered cruel defeat". "It is the unseen hand that lifts a man off a cliff over a pit of fire and returns him to the road from which he has veered. It is the rope that pulls a drowning man out of the deep sea and hauls him onto the deck of a boat to the breath of fresh air."

The hope of Advent is such concrete hope. This is hope for the future that flies in the face of current conditions, and which—crucially—transforms the way we enact our present reality. Because when such Advent hope takes root in us, we start to act on the nearness of God's realm. When we live in the peace of God's justice and righteousness, then we can find peace with our neighbors, and the world becomes more peaceful. When we live like we do not need to earn our salvation, then we can show grace to our enemies, and the world becomes more forgiving. When we live like we have all we need in God, then we can share God's abundance, and the world becomes more generous. When we live like death is not the last word, then we need not fear the grave, and the world becomes more joyful.

In this season of Advent, remember the promises of God. We worship and serve a God who holds all of history, who loves this world with deep compassion, and who has the power to draw us all home once more. There is nothing in life or in death that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, who is coming soon. Therefore we live these days of preparation for Christmas in the truth of God's presence. Our daily activities are outward signs of the inward anticipation for what's to come. The days are surely coming, just as surely as Christmas, so we wait with hope and anticipation. Our redemption is near, and the kingdom of God is at hand. That's a future we envision with God in Jesus Christ, and whose arrival we participate in with our actions each day. Thanks be to God for hope like this! Amen.