

“THE COMING DAYS”

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Jeremiah 33:14-16

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.

15 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.

16 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.”

UNCERTAINTY AND DREAD

Advent is the time when we anticipate
the coming of a Messiah.

And Advent begins by taking a clear eyed look
at a world filled with uncertainty and dread.

Uncertainty and dread,
that certainly describes Jeremiah’s world.
The Promised Land had been ravaged
by the Babylonians.

Jerusalem and the surrounding towns
are now ghost towns.
The place that was once so alive and vibrant
is now devoid of all life.

A modern day example might be the Russian town, Chernobyl after the nuclear reactor accident.

Have you seen pictures of that place?
It's eerie to see a town totally emptied out like that.

Well, that was what people saw when they saw Jerusalem and the Promised Land.

Those that viewed this apocalyptic scene said,
"This is it. Our country is destroyed.
It's the end of the world as we know it."

Jeremiah himself had no reason to have hope.
After all, when he wrote this, he was in prison.

But, while the prophet was in prison,
in the midst of all this chaos and despair,
the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.

"This is not the end.
The days are coming says the LORD
when the fortunes of God's people will be restored.
The days are coming when the promise of the Promised Land will once
again be a reality."

LONGING FOR SALVATION

The contrast between the reality of exile and the promise of restoration was profound.

There is often a wide gap between what is and the promise of what will be.

No wonder the psalmist
who wrote during the Exile cried out in despair,

“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down
and there we wept when we remembered Zion
...How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:1,4)

But, this is exactly what the prophecy of Jeremiah requires the people to do.

They are to sing of the Promised Land
while living in exile.

They are to dream of a new day,
a day of safety and prosperity,
even while their life is filled
with danger and uncertainty.

What about us?

Can we sing about God’s salvation
in a time of exile?

Can we believe the promises of God
despite evidence to the contrary?

Jeremiah’s word of hope in the midst of despair is a good way for us to begin our celebration of Advent.

In contrast to our holiday season,
Advent does not begin with parties and gift giving.

Advent begins with a sense of longing.
Things are not the way they should be.

And so we sing the Advent hymn,

“O come O come Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel.”

It’s not just Israel that needs to be ransomed.
We need to be ransomed.

This longing for salvation still resonates with us.

God's people are still often filled with a sense of uncertainty and dread.

We still long for the good old days.

We still long for deliverance.

And sometimes we wonder,

Is a new day even possible?

A PICTURE OF ADVENT

If you want to get a feeling for what this is like, a modern day picture of Advent, think about those folks camped out in a Walmart parking lot in California.

Their homes in the town of Paradise had been totally destroyed by the Camp Fire.

They had nowhere else to go.

They had lost everything.

They live in a tent in a Walmart parking lot while everyone else is at home celebrating Thanksgiving.

They were homeless.

And many had no idea what their next step might be.

Some authorities think that it might be years before utilities are restored to the area.

How can people have hope in such a situation?

That's Advent.

At least, that's how Advent begins

...with Paradise lost.

THE DAYS ARE COMING

But, into this world of destruction and despair,

God repeats a promise he had made centuries before to David.

A new day is coming.

Tears will be wiped away.

Cities will be rebuilt.

The time of suffering will be replaced
with a time of prosperity and joy..

Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet.

And indeed he is.

He weeps because he doesn't want to deliver God's Word of judgment.

But, in today's lesson Jeremiah gets a break
from all his crying.

Instead of judgment,
we have a word of hope for the future.

That's why this little section of Jeremiah is often called the Book of Conso-
lation.

In the midst of destruction and despair, God makes a new covenant with
his people.

God promises that the story is not over.

There is more to come.

And in the end the story will be a story of salvation.

And our lesson for today puts an exclamation point on this promise of
restoration.

This time of restoration is sure because the promise comes from God him-
self.

"The days are surely coming" says the prophet.

You can trust in the everlasting promises of God.

This passage reminds me of something Martin Luther King said during the
struggle for civil rights,

"I may not get there with you

...but I have seen the promised land...”

This kind of vision for the future
can change things today.

The days are surely coming says the prophet.

FALSE PROPHETS

We too live in discouraging times.
We are divided in so many ways,
and the future often seems foreboding.

The prophets of doom are many.
The news cycle bombards us
with dire warnings around the clock.

All around the world we hear people say
that things have never been worse.

But, the prophet Jeremiah challenges us with a promise from the Lord.

He asks, “Who are you going to believe?”

Are you going to believe the secular prophets on CNN and Fox news?

Or are you going to believe in the Word of the Lord?

There’s a new day coming.
This time of exile and destruction will not have the final word.

They didn’t have TV back when Jeremiah preached,
but they did have prophets who weren’t very prophetic.

When Jeremiah tried to warn his people about the coming Babylonian
storm,
these so-called secular prophets countered with a message that the people
wanted to hear.

“There’s nothing to worry about.

God is on our side.
Nobody can defeat us.”

And then the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem
and took God’s people into Exile.

Well, now after years of disaster, other prophets deliver a message of absolute despair.

They say,

“There is no hope.
Our home is a desolate wasteland.
God doesn’t love us any more.”

But, in this dark time,
this time of uncertainty and destruction
there came a ray of light.

God says,

“Don’t believe these false prophets.
I still love my people.
I don’t go back on my promises.

And the days are coming...
when that promise will be fulfilled.”

And what is the promise?

“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.”

False prophets mislead us in two ways.

There are some false prophets who are too positive.
They say that everything is just fine
when things are not fine.

They downplay dangers that are obvious.
They promote injustice.
They prefer lies to the truth in order to gain power.

On the other hand there are other false prophets who are too negative.

They almost delight in gloom and doom.
They paint apocalyptic images of the future,
and suggest that restoration is not possible.

The prophets of the Lord do neither of these things.

They tell us the hard truth,
a truth that we often don't want to hear.

Injustice and unrighteous behavior can have some terrible consequences.
A society that is not compassionate and just will pay a price.

GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS

But, today's lesson teaches us that, when all is said and done,
the power of God's salvation is greater than evil we often perpetuate.

In the end destruction and judgment will not prevail.
God's mercy will prevail.

In the end our faith is based upon
an unwavering hope, a sure expectation.
The promises of God will never fail.

One of my favorite verses comes
from the book of Lamentations.

Lamentations is an extended lament over the destruction of Jerusalem and
the exile of God's people.

Overall this book is quite depressing.
It's probably not a book that you read very often for your devotionals!

But, in the midst of that terrible lament,
the author remembers that destruction will not have the final word.

He pens the words that become the basis for the beloved hymn, Great is Thy Faithfulness.

He wrote,

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.
His mercies never come to an end.
They are new every morning.
Great is thy faithfulness.”

Even when God’s people are in exile,
the promises of the Lord hold true.

Even when the mighty trees have fallen
due to the wind and fire,
there is new life on the way.

Do you remember the forest fires in Yellowstone National Park started by lightning about 30 years ago? The destruction was overwhelming.

But, the recovery of the area was faster
than what many predicted.
In fact, some scientists believe that in the long run the fire set the stage for a healthier forest.

The dramatic recovery of vegetation is even visible from satellite photos.

When we look at the big picture,
we can see clearly.
A new day is coming.

In the same way God can use a time of destruction and judgment to usher in an era of greater salvation.

The prophet is saying that the Babylonian Exile does not spell the end of God’s people.

It is the beginning.

THE BRANCH

There will come a time
when a Branch will spring up from David
and bring about the promised reign of justice and righteousness.

This divine leader,
will bring new life out of the ashes.
He will do what the other kings could not do.
He will do “what is just and right in the land”.

The prophet Isaiah (11:1) also spoke
of this time of restoration.

He said that the time is coming
when God will raise up a sprout,
a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
“a righteous branch from David’s line”.

And precisely because this new leader,
this Branch does what is right and just,
he will save his people.

We read in our lesson,
“In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.”

What did Israel need in order
to be safe, secure and prosperous?
They needed what every nation needs,
a leader who does what is just and right.

JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

But, how you define righteousness and justice?

Is leadership just and right when it does what is legal, when it does what is
allowed under the law?

Or is there some higher moral code
that guides us in the path of righteousness?

Jeremiah prophesies that there will be a leader
who will help us define true justice and righteousness.

The days are coming when God will send his Son, the greater Son of David
to define the way of true righteousness and justice.

His life will be a template for God's salvation.

And those who find themselves in a place of judgment and exile will be
given hope

Forgiveness and restoration are always possible.

The righteousness of the Lord will be more than a law given from above.
In Jesus we will have a flesh and blood example of righteousness here on
earth.

And the salvation he brings will be more than just salvation for Israel.

It will be salvation for the world.

THE LORD IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

The leaders we select will always be flawed.
Try as they might, they cannot bring about a reign of righteousness and
justice.

Trusting in human beings for salvation
will always lead us to a time of exile and profound disappointment.

Do not listen to the prophets
who promise to make us great again.

Sin and despair run too deep in every place.
The problem of injustice and unrighteousness are too great for us.

We are too weak to build the kingdom of God on earth.

On the other hand, it is also a mistake to trust the prophets of gloom and doom.

Some seem to take a perverse pleasure in making dire predictions about the future.

And some even claim that this is the Christian message.

But, this is not the promise.

Salvation is not based upon what we can do.
Salvation is based upon what God can do for us.

Salvation is based upon the fact that
(as our lesson for today puts it)
“the Lord is our righteousness”.

That sounds a lot like what Paul said in his letter to the Romans.

He wrote about a “righteousness from God, apart from the law” that “comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

To say it another way, we are made right with God and the world is restored
by the power of God’s forgiveness
as revealed in Christ Jesus.

We can’t take credit for this.
But, we can trust in it.

HOPE

Today is the first Sunday of Advent.
And it’s also the Sunday that we take communion.

The Lord’s Supper is very appropriate for this Sunday.

It captures the dissonant mood of Advent quite well.

We speak of body broken and blood shed.
But, at the same time we talk about the kingdom that comes.

A kingdom in which people will come from North and South, East and West
to feast at God's kingdom.

This Sunday is all about longing
for a Savior to be born.

It may seem like hope is in short supply,
and the promise is far away.

But, that's not true.
The Lord is our righteousness.

This small branch will become a mighty tree.

He still comes into our life, and new life is born.

Let us have hope
as we watch and wait this Advent season.

Amen.