

Faithful in the Hope
By Reverend Litton Logan
December 2, 2018

Scriptures:

¹⁴The 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. ¹⁵In 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. ¹⁶In 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." **Jeremiah 33:14-16 (NRSV)**

Sermon:

On this first Sunday of Advent 2018, we hear words from the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was from a priestly family in ancient Judea. It is believed his prophetic call came to him in his mid- to late teens. Jeremiah's call utterly consumed his life, often making him an outcast among family and friends and nearly got him killed a couple of times.

Jeremiah's prophetic career began as the Assyrian empire was in decline and the neo-Babylonian Empire was in its ascendancy. Jeremiah's message and insights from God were directed at the Southern Kingdom of Judah because by the time he came on the scene, the Northern Kingdom of Israel had long been defeated, its leaders and leading citizens had been scattered and absorbed into the Assyrian Empire.

Jeremiah's message condemned the ruling elite and those who followed and participated in their idolatrous involvement with local Canaanite and foreign gods. This charge of idolatry is symbolic of much larger issues. Those issues were Judea's accommodation of foreign influences in matters of commerce, trade agreements, and military-political alliances that victimized many of God's people for the benefit of those in power.

Think of Judah's idolatry this way. If a nation has trade agreements and military alliances with another nation, they generally build and maintain embassies or consulates in each other's territory in furtherance of their agreements and alliances. In Jeremiah's day, given that there was no separation of church-state and the economy was what was known as a palace-temple economy that was fueled and sustained by agriculture on the backs of the peasants, Judea's idolatry could be understood as allowing pagan temples - embassies - on Judean soil and statues of pagan gods on display. In Jeremiah's day, many if not most people believed that there were many gods, but God's people were to worship only one god, YHWH, and to have no other gods beside or before him.

However, unlike the god of Israel, pagan gods and their cults were not very interested in people's moral and ethical behaviors; only feast days, seasonal celebrations, and sacrifices, sometimes even human sacrifices. In such a scenario, let us equate religious devotion, feast days, and sacrifices with the support of the place-temple economies and furthering the interests of the ruling elite. Jeremiah pointed out that people at all levels of society are in God's sights who condone and participate in the immorality and unethical practices associated with the pagan gods. This was especially so for the fertility cults and their sexual practices.

Jeremiah said that God is going to use foreign forces as instrument of punishment and purging, and the leaders should not try to form alliances with other nations to avoid their just deserts. Instead, they were to hold fast, acquiesce to the Babylonians and take what was coming, trusting God in the end.

Hear the words Jeremiah received from God:

Jeremiah 7:16-27 (NRSV)

¹⁶As for you, [Jeremiah] do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you. ¹⁷Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? ¹⁸The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven (the goddess Ishtar); and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger. ¹⁹Is it I whom they provoke? says the LORD. Is it not themselves, to their own hurt? ²⁰Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: My anger and my wrath shall be poured out on this place, on human beings and animals, on the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground; it will burn and not be quenched.

Thus, we hear the offence, the warning, and later we will see the punishment of the Southern Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonian Empire because the leaders and the people did not heed the word of God. Jerusalem and many towns in Judea were decimated, the great Temple destroyed, and Judah's elite and many of its artisans were hauled off to Babylon. But this is not the end. Jeremiah goes on to say that God will not forsake God's promise to king David and God's people any more than God will cancel out the natural laws of the universe. Jeremiah understood that those who repent; that is, return to a true relationship to God will be restored.

Thus, there is hope- and that hope is found in God being true to God's promise to David. That promise being:

¹⁷For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, ¹⁸and 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.

The message of Jeremiah for today I think is obvious. Jeremiah condemned the idolatrous and abusive social, political, and economic ways of nations, and those who supported them. Yet, Jeremiah tempered his condemnations with words of hope and joy for those of God and those that were repentant. I mention this because the more discerning among us can read the signs of our time and know the consequences if nations, leaders, and people of the world do not turn from idolatrous individuality, immoral cultural accommodations, unholy trade and military alliances, political corruption, and rabid selfishness to seek the ways of God. I add that nations and their people that were or are constituted to live contrary to the ways of God have come and gone and/or are on the way out.

Let me say that at the heart of a true prophet's message are some simple truths. Those truths are: God is sovereign Lord of Life, God's ways bless, and breaking God's will and ways brings a loss of joy in life and often disaster at the personal and collective levels.

However, be that as it may, I want to focus on Jeremiah's words of hope - real hope for those who trust in God and are faithful.

Contrary to anyone's imagination at the time the Babylonians were conquered by the Chaldeans, the Chaldeans generally tried to repatriate captives and help them return to their homelands and former ways of life, which included helping them rebuild temples to their gods. The idea being it is better to have friendly vassal states and a continuous stream of tribute as buffers to one's major enemies as opposed to keeping a bunch of captives.

Thus, the Jews in the Babylonian captivity were given permission to return home. Some went home and began the process of rebuilding and reclaiming their land and heritage, including rebuilding their Temple. It wasn't easy, returning and rebuilding had its own challenges, but they were home, on God's land, with a large degree of self-determination and all that meant personally and collectively.

The promise of God that Jeremiah proclaimed is that a righteous branch of David's lineage will always occupy a place of leadership for God's people. This ideal Davidic ruler will come and bring justice and righteousness to God's people. This is more than just good behavior or good rule on the part of the Righteous One, but his regime will be energized and characterized by the ways of justice and righteousness that flow from the heart of the people regardless of social status or position.

Out of each generation, God has called and empowered people like Jeremiah to confront and to condemn evil and to preach a message of repentance, hope, and blessing. Christians believe that God made good on the divine promise to David and extended its blessings to the entire human race in Jesus of Nazareth, a once and for all sacrifice before God on Calvary. No matter who has tried to suppress or deny this message, it still fuels the human spirit in the face of it all.

The death of President George W. Bush Friday night brought to mind a time when he was Vice President, representing the U.S. at the funeral of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Bush was deeply moved by a silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow. She stood motionless by the coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's wife performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that must surely rank as one of the most profound acts of civil disobedience: she reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest.

There in the citadel of secular atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it all still held in her heart the knowledge and hope that her husband was wrong. She hoped that there was another life, and that that life was best represented by Jesus, who died on the cross, and that the same Jesus might yet have mercy on her husband.¹

Let us hear Jeremiah again:

Jeremiah 31:33--34 (NRSV)

³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Advent each year reminds us of the fulfillment of God's promise to be with us, to lead us, and to empower us to be God's people. God through the Holy Spirit has written in our hearts the assurances of forgiveness and blessings in the message of Immanuel. No matter how bad things get, know this - God is with us, to help, preserve, to bless, and sustain us until we meet God either in death or in the coming day of God's fullest presence on this earth. That's God's promise.

Senator Mark Hatfield tells of touring Calcutta with Mother Teresa and visiting the so-called "House of Dying" where sick children were cared for in their last days, and the dispensary, where

¹ Gary Thomas, in *Christianity Today*, October 3, 1994, p. 26.

the poor lined up by the hundreds to receive medical attention. Watching Mother Teresa minister to these people, feeding and nursing those left by others to die, Hatfield was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the suffering she and her co-workers faced daily. "How can you bear the load without being crushed by it?" he asked. Mother Teresa replied, "My dear Senator, I am not called to be successful, I am called to be faithful."²

God was true to God's promise beyond any expectations that the ancients may have had and raised up on a cross a descendant of David, who's very being was and is justice, righteousness, compassion, and healing restoration for all humanity. Therefore, this Advent season let us renew our commitment to be faithful to God's promise that is the Christ as we seek to discern and navigate the immoral and unethical climates of this world and as we move toward celebrating the fulfillment of God promise in the Christ on Christmas day.

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²Beyond Hunger, Beals.

<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/faithfulness.htm>