

## The Lord Our Righteousness

### Jeremiah 33:14-16

<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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."

Today we start a new church year with words from Jeremiah. Much of the story told in Jeremiah has to do with the threat and fulfillment of the destruction of Judah and, in particular, Jerusalem. The people have been violating their covenantal relationship with God, and the subsequent Babylonian control would serve as punishment for their infidelity. The complete sacking of Jerusalem, however, is more horrific and absolute than the people might have imagined. The destruction is so severe that God's voice, through the prophet, also wails in lamentation.

In view of the devastation, Kathleen O'Connor describes the situation of the people in this way: "The people... are taken captive, dragged from their land, and deprived of their Temple. They are beaten, imprisoned, and face death as a people, and, like Jeremiah, they cry out to God in anger and despair." John Calvin imagined their situation in these terms: "As they were then exposed to slaughter,...the children of God saw thousand deaths; so that it could not be but that terror almost drove them to despair; and in their exile they saw that they were far removed from their own country, without any hope of a return." In our own time we face our second year of a global pandemic, with Michigan having seen some of the highest numbers of infections in recent months. Few, if any of us, have not been affected personally or know someone who has lost loved ones to the virus. We continue to face health challenges, both physical and emotional that keep us on our knees before God. Where is our hope for a better day?

The people of Judah faced with death, slaughter, and imprisonment in a strange place, who would not despair? Despair is among the most human of human conditions. In a number of his writings, Reinhold Niebuhr associated despair with our failed attempts to procure security for ourselves, optimistically pretending that we are not subject to the fluctuations of being human. Humans meet despair when we cannot imagine God's promised alternative future.

Now we come to the season of Advent which is puzzling to many Christians. The stories read during this season are, by and large, not our childhood favorites. They have no star in the east guiding devout magi, no soliloquy of angels stirring shepherds to go and see the babe, no harried innkeeper, no touching moment when Mary ponders these things in her heart.

In our despair the stories of Advent are dug from the harsh soil of human struggle and the littered landscape of dashed dreams. They are told from the vista where sin still reigns supreme and hope seems to have gone on vacation. We prefer the all Christmas all the time radio stations notes of joy and gladness rather than the keys of Advent that encourage our hearts and minds to prepare for Christ return and living faithfully in our human state.

Advent seems to leave us dizzy over time. Advent is not a steady, constant, "time marches on" kind of time, a persistent drumbeat of day after day, year after year. Advent is unpredictable time, unsteady time. In this time-tumbling season, we look for a baby to be born while we know that the baby has already been born, and still is being born in us—this Emmanuel who came and is coming and is among us right now. Not only is Advent not well behaved, neat, and orderly; it contorts time. Given the nature of Advent, it is no surprise that Jeremiah is its herald.

Jeremiah speaks to hostages being seduced to start a new life in balmy Babylon. He tells a tough audience that, despite every sign to the contrary, "days are

coming," days when God's promises will be fulfilled. Jeremiah tells his kin that God's future will come not by giving up on God's promises and making the best of a bad situation—after all, "when in Babylon"—but by trusting in the creative and redemptive and sure purposes of God: "Days are coming!"

With the world that he has known crumbling around him, Jeremiah pushes his people to see a future, God's future, which seems laughable given the current circumstances. No wonder Jeremiah is the church's usher into Advent. Later in the season, Mary will sing about God's future, despite her own laughable circumstance.

Along with Jeremiah and Mary, Heidi Neumark is another Advent singer. Heidi is a Lutheran pastor who writes about this holy season amid her ministry in the roughest part of the Bronx. She writes:

Probably the reason I love Advent so much is that it is a reflection of how I feel most of the time. I might not feel sorry during Lent, when the liturgical calendar begs repentance. I might not feel victorious, even though it is Easter morning. I might not feel full of the Spirit, even though it is Pentecost and the liturgy spins out fiery gusts of ecstasy. But during Advent, I am always in sync with the season.

Advent unfailingly embraces and comprehends my reality. And what is that? I think of the Spanish word *anhelo*, or longing or hope. Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire and the cry of hope bursts forth: Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!

As the first, lone candle of Advent wreath burns, Jeremiah recalls his own city burning, and yet he speaks not of destruction but of God's future as he offers his cry of longing, of hope. Like Jeremiah, most of

us have our own list for which we cry *anhelo*, and we all know people with their own lists of longings and hope.

As I listen to the cries of Jeremiah throughout the scope of his prophecy, I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future will be a reality beyond the violent boastings of the ruling Babylon of the day. I long for the day that is surely coming when in God's future the poor are not sent to shelters or forced to sleep on the streets. I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future has no space for violence, when we will stop producing body bags—because there are no dead soldiers or civilians to fill them. I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future affords no room for rancor, a day when our world is no longer torn asunder by racism and sexism or the many other “isms” we face each day.

Sharing Advent from the perspective of Jeremiah, I long for the confidence of the prophet's words about the righteous future of our God. I long for people to know the God whom Jeremiah heralds and whom Jesus will incarnate, not a hidden God who refuses to traffic in the human enterprise, but a God who hears God's people when they cry out in hope and anticipation. I long for people to know, not the God of religious fanatics or bigots, not a God who enjoys seeing Jerusalem set afire, but the God who, in God's own time, will bring more mercy and justice than we will ever grasp.

As we consider the prophecy from Jeremiah, we hear the hope in his words. Maybe, then, Jeremiah is the best biblical voice to lead us into Advent, the season that brings *anhelo* and hope to expression.

**Gary W. Charles**

The writer of Jeremiah recounts the promises made to "the house of Israel and the house of Judah," that God would provide the people a safe, just, and peaceful future under a justly appointed and righteous ruler. As the people were in exile, God's promise, in this case, is meant to be a comfort and source of hope to the exiled. Here we meet the God who promises to protect and restore the people, even as they are in the midst of great suffering and at the edge of despair. It is in precisely this context that God speaks the promise, and it is in precisely this context that despair opens the door to hope. Although we do not see the promises of God, we wait with faith and patience, and we look forward to their fulfillment.

Jeremiah reminds us of the importance of waiting, anticipating, and trusting in a promised future that seems very removed from our current circumstance. And it is in the season of Advent that we engage in the persistent and crucial Christian task of *imagination*. Together with the prophet, we are called not only to name suffering and injustice, but to lean into God's promised alternative future.

We rely on God's continuous presence and acts on our behalf. Trusting in God's provision for us in the past, we imagine what shape God's fulfillment of promises will take in the future. Although we do not bring about God's intended alternative future through sheer force of will, in our waiting we do try to place ourselves in a posture so that we might become partners with God in the advent of a new reality.

The promise Jeremiah recalls is not an otherworldly, escapist spirituality that encourages us merely to "wait it out." In various scripture we find repeated affirmations that God's promise includes a change of social, economic, and political relationships. We can, as the prophet anticipate a time in which even the failed leadership will be made aright and "do what kings are supposed to do, namely, practice justice and righteousness... When the king practices justice and righteousness, the city and the land will be healed and saved." In the moment of near-despair, the prophet calls us to imagine a new social context in which we live

together in safety, peace, and righteousness. God will do this, as promised and give us new life. **Jennifer Ryan Ayres**

*Is the Lord our righteousness? Are we ready to be named and claimed by this kind of God? Are we willing to welcome the day when God's justice and righteousness will be fulfilled? When the promise is fulfilled, and the king reigns in our lives, we will have a new name: "The LORD is our righteousness." Jesus began his ministry by speaking words of "righteousness" to John the Baptist: "Let it be so now... in this way to fulfill all righteousness" ([Matt. 3:15](#)). Righteousness is not an attitude or an absolute standard. It refers to conduct in accord with God's purposes. It is doing the good thing and the God thing: right doing as opposed to wrongdoing and doing as opposed to being. Righteousness is the humble ethic of living toward others in just and loving relationships. **Deborah A. Block***

This is our hope and pray in this Advent season.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.