

The Promise

First Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴ 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."

The season of Advent is puzzling to many of us Christians. The stories read during this season are, by and large, not 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.

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 outlook where sin still reigns supreme and hope has gone on vacation. Many of us prefer the major notes of joy and gladness in the Christmas stories to the minor keys of Advent.

Advent also leaves 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 spoke to hostages being seduced to start a new life in balmy Babylon. He told a tough audience that, despite every sign to the contrary, "days are coming," days when God's promises would be fulfilled. Jeremiah told his kin that God's future would come not by giving up on God's promises and making the best of a bad situation—after

all, "when in Babylon" are we supposed to do as the Babylonians?—NO! It is by trusting in the creative and redemptive and sure purposes of God: "Days are coming!" God will keep the Promise!

With the world that he had known crumbling around him, Jeremiah pushed his people to see a future, God's future, which seemed laughable given their 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, let me tell you about another Advent singer. Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran pastor who writes about this holy season amid her ministry in the roughest part of the Bronx:

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 church 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 scriptures spin 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. Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire and the cry of *anhelo* 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 *anhelo*. Like Jeremiah, most of us have their own list for which we cry *anhelo*, and we know many people with their own lists of longings, for which they cry *anhelo*.

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 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 *human trafficking and opioid addictions*, nor racism and sexism.

Preaching 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 *anhele*. 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. **Gary W.**

Charles

As we consider the prophecy from Jeremiah, let's look again at the situation of the people. 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, was more horrific and absolute than the people imagined. The destruction was so severe that God's voice, through the prophet, also wailed in lamentation.

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 the context in even more explicit 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."

We are not so different from the people of Jeremiah's time. Today we face gun violence, major lay-offs announced at Christmas time, natural disasters around the country: lack of rain...too much rain...floods...volcanoes erupting...earth quakes...if we can believe the television...children go to bed hungry every night...countless people are homeless or are in danger of homelessness...and the list goes on and on. While despair is among the most human of human conditions, it cannot be fully understood apart from its spiritual implications. 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 human condition. Despair is characterized primarily by the conspicuous absence of hope. Humans meet despair when we cannot imagine God's promised alternative future. **Jennifer Ryan Ayres**

Last week I had the honor of working at a Good Giving Day event for my agency. You know how it is. We eat too much on Thanksgiving. We shop too much on Black Friday, local business Saturday and cyber-Monday. On the first Tuesday after Thanksgiving people are encouraged to volunteer at or give donations to Non-Profit agencies. Employees and volunteers gathered, sorted and passed out new personal items to person who were homeless, had mental illness, seniors and children. Over a thousand people came through. But that was not what really touched me, rather it a few conversations. One was with a older woman who said she was homeless and was sleeping on a church floor. It reminded me that most of us are one pay check away from needing the services of a non-profit ourselves. When I mentioned this to one of my coworkers, he said he was extremely aware that it was God's grace that made him the giver rather than the receiver. Another coworker told me how he has been a single parent

for 11 years. He told me how we knew about being under-water with his mortgage and how he almost lost his home when his wife walked out when they had just bought a home that required both their salaries and they had a 4 month-old. He then told me about God's promise fulfilled when he learned to totally surrender to God. Jeremiah tells us no matter how difficult the times may be...God's promise is sure. "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made..."

Maybe, then, Jeremiah is the best biblical voice to lead us into Advent, the season that brings *anhelo* to expression. In many ways, Jeremiah's promise that "days are coming" finds its most poignant meaning at this table of *anhelo*. Just look at it. The communion meal does not point to magi and a star, but to a world gone mad. It is a table not cloaked in romance and sweet memories, but set with food paid for at a price way too dear. It is not just a table of *anhelo*, it is *the* table of *anhelo* for all with deep longings, people who pray with Jeremiah for the days that are surely coming.

Maybe Advent is not so puzzling after all. **Gary W. Charles**

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