

Longing For Release

Bible Reading:
Jeremiah 33: 14-16
Luke 21: 25-36

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As many of you know, this past summer we traveled to the west coast. One of the awesome sights was the rain forest, with gargantuan trees and lush, dense vegetation.

One spot that stands out was a place where obviously there had been wind damage. Devastation was visible from logs scattered in this direction and that. It seemed, for all the world, to be complete and random destruction. But then, from the shattered remains of one trunk we saw a miracle -

out of that stump had grown a tiny green shoot. And over the years since that shoot first appeared it had turned into a towering tree with a thick trunk of its own. Beautiful. Strong. Tall.

It was new life rising out of death.

I couldn't help but think of that as I read the Old Testament passage for this week. Harold will read them to us in a moment. Understand, as you hear them, that they are words written by a prophet sitting in jail, serving an indefinite sentence with unspecified charges against him. They are words that come to a city, Jerusalem, that is besieged by a mighty army which is busy building siege ramps, preparing for the final assault and the total annihilation of the place. It is a city characterized by anarchy, famine, bitterness and death.

It is a hopeless environment, into which is proclaimed the promise of coming hope.

Today marks the beginning of the season of Advent - the season that remembers coming – the coming of real hope, substantial hope, the coming of hope among a hopeless people under tremendous pressure.

Jeremiah's words of hope also form a foundation for other prophetic words -
words of prophecy about another coming;
words spoken by Jesus.

Let's read, and then consider, both these passages -

Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16, p.738 (OT)
 Luke 21:25-36, p.85 (NT)



Jeremiah proclaims from his prison cell:

"A righteous branch will spring up for David."

A king will come from the family tree of David, the great King of the ancient Jewish people.

Only..... that family tree seemed in Jeremiah's time to be as good as dead, pushed over by the storms and winds of history. How could anything grow from it? The army was knocking at the remnants of David's kingdom. The king was cowering in his palace. Death and destruction - that seemed the future.

Falling over and rotting away into nothing.

Certainly NOT a new branch growing.

But there it is - the prophecy.

A righteous branch will spring up for David: and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

God's people will be saved.

They will live in safety.

He shall execute justice - no patronage; no scandal; no compromise. There will be true ruling over the people.
Pure.

And righteousness in the land - That is, there will be what is best, what leads to safety, to what is good and upbuilding. It will NOT be a cold, legalistic enforcing of a bunch of crushing rules and judgements.

The roaring winds of destruction, that seemed to be pushing over and ripping up everything that looked so strong and dependable -

that destruction will not have the last word.
The miracle branch will.

However dismal things may seem, it is not the end.
There is life yet coming.

By the way, did you hear?

That miracle branch,
springing up as life out of death
that branch is going to have a name!
The Lord is our righteousness.

The justice coming from this branch. And the righteousness.
They're coming from the Lord.
He's the branch grower.
He's the branch.

Which is what we can see, what we remember and what we celebrate on this first Sunday of Advent.

Seeing, remembering and celebrating something that the people of Jeremiah's day could absolutely NOT appreciate or even remotely guess from their vantage point in history.

What they couldn't see from their point in history

What we CAN see and remember and celebrate

is that no matter how horribly unjust people can be to each other
no matter how incredibly non-right, deeply wrong, human action can be
that injustice and wrongness has to give way
and WILL give way to the great and powerful
justice and righteousness of the Lord.

It will spring up. It will grow. It will live.
Finally. Eternally.
It will live.

Old king David knew it.

That's why he penned the words we used to open our worship service this morning, the words of Psalm 25 -

To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
O my God, I trust in You;
Let me not be ashamed;
Let not my enemies triumph over me.
Indeed, let no one who waits on You be ashamed;
Show me Your ways, O LORD;
Teach me Your paths.
Lead me in Your truth and teach me,
For You are the God of my salvation;
On You I wait all the day.

Human beings make promises every day, promises that they forget.
They give their word - and that word evaporates before lunch time.
They make commitments, brittle commitments that soon shatter.

Which is why Jerusalem was surrounded by siege works and hostile soldiers; why death stared them in the face.

It's why so often we get into trouble in our lives.
Promises and commitments made and broken.

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.....

.....the Lord is our righteousness.

His word is just.

His word is right.

His word is strong and dependable and sure.



It is sure in Jesus.

This ancient German work, of unknown origin, shows Jesus as the crowning branch in the tree that comes from David.

Jesus is the One who brings to earth the justice and rightness of God.

In Him is to be found relief and life.

(Click on image for enlarged view)

Relief and life that we can find no where else.

Everyone else, everything else, gets blown over or falls apart somewhere along the line. Many of you know that oh so well.

But Jesus remains.

The days are surely coming.....

In a backroom of Bethlehem, years after Jeremiah's words, the day came for a virgin to give birth.

Jesus came. The son of God come to earth.

The God of justice come to a world that can be so unjust.

The God of faithfulness come to a world filled with unfaithfulness.

The Lord is our righteousness.

Indeed - **HE** is our righteousness.

Jeremiah didn't tell his people to find justice and righteousness by trying harder, by living better. It is to be found in the Lord.

The gospel truth is that Jesus is our righteousness.

God looks at us through the lens of Jesus and declares our lives to be right.

We are seen, through Jesus, as righteous.

That's what God sees.

Says 1 Corinthians 1:30:

Jesus has become for us wisdom from God - that is our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

The promise originally made to a desperate people in a small corner of ancient Palestine is now extended to people all across the globe.

Everything that has been damaged and twisted and broken and stunted by the effects of human deceit
and injustice and wrong
By sin
Will one day be set right by Jesus.

The son of God and His eternal power is greater than any power of decay that we experience in life.

Be they powers of decay caused by our own foolishness and sin
or powers we experience by virtue of living in a sin-scarred world.

Like the hymn we sang to Jesus at last week's communion service:

*You, you are my wholeness.
You are my completeness.
My soul, my thirsty soul,
can
rest in the depth of your love.*

Hang on to that, friends.

For Jesus is the only strong and sure hope in a world where it gets so hard to watch the news because of one suicide bombing after another, another illegal settlement destabilizing the West Bank, uncertainty over peace in southern Sudan, children dying from the flu, a little girl still missing from her home in Toronto.

Jesus is the only strong and sure hope when you pick up a church bulletin and week after week read about chemotherapy, and death, and pain; when you pick up the phone and hear a friend's struggle or sit in your office with a co-worker who's suddenly single again.

The son of God who cared enough to come to earth and become one with us; to share our experience, and to carve a road to heaven for us through His journey to the cross.

He is our only strength and hope.

Hang on to that, friends, more than anything else.
Pray for its fulfilment.
Live in anticipation of its unfolding.

As the gospel of Luke warns:

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.....

Eugene Peterson translates it this way in *The Message*:

"Be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it's going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don't go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that's coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man."

It's very easy to get caught up with morning alarm clocks and work schedules and homework routines and hockey practice -

to the point where we lose sight of the great promise and the ultimate direction of human life.
We lose sight of Jesus.

Be on guard.

It's also very easy to get caught up in self-justification — how right my own way is, my own cause, my own life; to the point where I don't realize that my human weakness and sin is just as much a part of the problem here on earth as is that of the next person or group or nation.

Sometimes we forget that, personally.

Sometimes political groups, organizations or nations can forget that.

Be on guard.

For the promise is yet to be fully fulfilled.

Yes, Christmas celebrates that Jesus has come.

But remember - Jesus is coming again.

Luke 21:8 says: *Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*

One of the first things they teach you in defensive driving is to keep your eyes up. Look ahead - at least 10 seconds ahead in driving time. Way up the road. Because then, alert and aware, you'll drive safe. You'll arrive alive.

Advent calls us to travel our lives with heads up, eyes down the road. Towards the return of Christ. So that we can travel safe. And arrive alive.

Jesus describes in poetic, prophetic words a time when it will seem that the world is coming apart at the seams:

On the earth distress among nations.....

people will faint for fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world..

In the midst of that kind of turmoil, chaos and fear

when things seem absolutely at an unresolvable worst

Jesus will return with power and great glory.

Friends, we celebrate Advent in a time of year when the weather gets colder, and days get shorter & darker. A symbol, sometimes, of how our lives can be - shrinking, icing over, dark.

A time when we need hope.

Real hope.

Not just tinsel and paper hope.

Remember -

The One born in Bethlehem's manger is the Powerful King of the Universe.

That is at the centre of the Christian message.

That is the hope by which we live.

We can bring our broken, frightened, damaged lives to Him
and find hope.

We can take our futures, about which sometimes we can be very unsure
and find peace.

And we can tackle the challenges of life with some measure of confidence.

Because the end is certain.

We know where we are going.

And we know who holds the final word on that end.

He is One who journeys with us even today.

And we are invited to look towards the day when He will appear for all to see
the day when He will make everything right and just and new

Brothers and sisters - Until then, remember:

He is here for us when our lives feel like the lives of ancient Jeremiah -
- under siege.

Perhaps because of sickness.
Perhaps because we're not getting a fair shake at work.
Perhaps because of worry about the kids.
Perhaps because our boyfriend just took off.

In those times we look to heaven, we lay open our soul to Jesus
*"Lord, you were here. You know what I experience.
I'm stuck. I need your power. Come to me."*

Heaven and earth will pass away, said Jesus. But my words will not pass away.
He is faithful.
He is coming.

For us.
For those we love.
For children playing near mine-littered fields in Afghanistan.
For widows in Iraq.

Ah, yes -
Lord Jesus, come.
Even so - come quickly!