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Newport News, Virginia
November 28, 2009

Living in the Grip of a Promise
Jeremiah 33:14-16

The stories of Advent, for the most part, are not childhood favorites.¹ There are no wise men, no star of Bethlehem, no angels singing from on high...no mangers, Marys or Josephs, or “shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night.” We have to wait for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day for those lectionary readings. Oddly enough, the stories of Advent come out of the harshness of life—difficulty in search of a future, despair giving birth to hope.

Such is the case for the Jeremiah passage. Under King Nebuchadnezzar, Jerusalem had been previously attacked and leaders of the nation had been taken into exile. Jeremiah was in prison for speaking out against the administration of Judah’s King Zedekiah and Judah’s false prophets. The Babylonian army was once again outside the walls of the capital city, and this time they would crush Jerusalem and destroy the temple built by Solomon. Jeremiah’s concern and the point of his call as a prophet of God was the unrighteous way the people were living and the unrighteous way the leaders were governing. Their ways were not “right” in the sight of God. Jeremiah felt that Judah’s ongoing problems were directly related to their attitudes and their ongoing patterns of life.

An interesting story occurs just before the second invasion of Jerusalem and is told in chapter thirty-two, preceding our text for today. With the armies of Babylon tearing at the walls of Jerusalem—imminent devastation and destruction in the air—Jeremiah says that God revealed to him that his cousin was to visit him in prison hoping to sell him some property that he owned. God said, “Buy it, Jeremiah.” That would be like a resident of New Orleans in the 48 hours before Katrina hit the city in 2005, calling you and asking if you had an interest in buying some property in downtown New Orleans. Only a fool would be interested in such a proposition—or else a prophet of God. In the presence of public officials and being duly recorded for public records, Jeremiah

¹ Gary W. Charles, “Homiletical Perspective” essay from *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press: 2009), 3.

bought the land. It was to be a symbol of hope for Jerusalem and God's promise of a new day for the people of Israel and Judah...in spite of the oncoming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

So, our Advent story with its promise for today is one that comes out of much heartbreak, fear, and angst. The message of Jeremiah calls us to a more righteous way of living, coupled with the promise that with a return to doing what is right in the eyes of God renewal will occur.

The Gregorian calendar that we follow in the western world has its new year beginning on January 1. In the United States, we look forward to celebrating Thanksgiving, enjoying the festivities that begin the month-long cultural ending to the year. Christmas decorations are up by Thanksgiving weekend. Black Friday, with its myriad of sales, offers the hope of retailers ending the business year with a profit. Culturally, our calendar year ends on a nostalgic note of celebrating the close of the year with a spirit of thanksgiving, holiday gatherings, Thanksgiving and Christmas/New Year breaks for the school year, and generally a time of festivities for those who feel like being festive. College bowl games, family gatherings, special social and church gatherings all end with self-improvement resolutions on January 1.

Don't hear me wrong. I love the traditions of this time of year. Many of the things we celebrate have a way of softening our hearts, making us think more generously, rekindling relationships, volunteering our time and creative energy to worthy charitable organizations. Where would the venues of art, music, and literature be without the stories and traditions of Christmas?

It's just that our Gregorian calendars end with this warm, nostalgic celebration of Jesus' birth, while the liturgical church year *begins* with a sobering call to take responsibility for this promise of God that we find in the birth of Jesus.

While the prelude to this birth often takes the form of "wait," it is more appropriately described by the passages that call us to "Wake up!" Jeremiah's call was one for Judah to "Wake up!" to the right way of God. Jesus' call to Israel 600 years later was to "Wake up!" to life. His parable of the ten young women waiting on the bridegroom was to stay awake. "*Wachet Auf*" was Bach's title. Our way of expressing it is to "stay awake at the wheel" or "Focus, Plan, and

Execute,” to use sports or business lingo. “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times,” Charles Dickens wrote concerning the French Revolution. “It was the best of time, it was the worst of times,” the writers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke could have written at the beginning of their gospels.

Despair is characterized by the absence of hope. Despair is the theological conclusion that things are so bad even God’s help and intervention will make no difference. Today’s text from Jeremiah is addressed to people in exile, people in the midst of great suffering and at the edge of despair:

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah a second time, while he was still confined in the court of the guard: ²Thus says the Lord who made the earth, the Lord who formed it to establish it — the Lord is his name: ³Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known

¹⁰Thus says the Lord: In this place of which you say, “It is a waste without human beings or animals,” in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without inhabitants, human or animal, there shall once more be heard ¹¹the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord: “Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!” For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord.

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 33:1-3, 10-11)

It is in the season of Advent that we engage in the strenuous and crucial Christian task of imagination.² Strenuous, because we must take responsibility to be a partner of righteousness. You know the definition of righteousness, don’t you? It simply means doing what is right, ethical, principled, and honorable. The psalmist said, “He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake,” or in Eugene Peterson’s words: “True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.” If you don’t like the way your life is going, with God’s help and guidance take responsibility to make it better. If you don’t like

² Jennifer Ryan Ayres, “Theological Perspective” essay from *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press: 2009), 4-6.

the way a conversation is going, use honesty, vulnerability, and grace to make it different.

Advent is also the season during which we engage in the crucial Christian task of imagination. “Life without idealism is empty indeed. We just hope or starve to death,” Pearl S. Buck once wrote.

Jeremiah’s words to those exiles in Babylon were words of promise from God. It is a hard thing to believe in a promise, to live by it day after day. It is a hard thing to believe in a promise with no power to make it come true. Everything is in the future tense—the city, the peace and security, the blessing. Everything *will* happen, by and by, but in the meantime what is there to live on? And yet, what better way to live than in the grip of a promise—a divine one at that?

In a recent newsletter article, I reminisced about seeing my dad read some of Louis L’Amour’s western novels. The most recent chapter Wednesday Evening Adult study’s book chapter began with an unexpected L’Amour quote: “There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. That will be the beginning.” Such was the case for the Israelites in Jeremiah’s time. Such may be the case for some of you. It’s Advent. It’s time to remember God’s promise and take responsibility to midwife a healthier world.

Prayer

All knowing and all loving God, move us beyond our complacency and transform our unrighteous ways into your ways through the living presence of Christ we ask. AMEN.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

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."

Psalms 25:1-10

1To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

2O my God, in you I trust;

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me.

3Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;

let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

4Make me to know your ways, O LORD;

teach me your paths.

5Lead me in your truth, and teach me,

for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long.

6Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,

for they have been from of old.

7Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me,

for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

8Good and upright is the LORD;

therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

9He leads the humble in what is right,

and teaches the humble his way.

10All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.