December 2, 2018
Jeremiah 33:14-16
Hope is on the Way

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Jeremiah 33:14-16 New Revised Standard Version

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. 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. 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.”

One of the things that my husband Lee and I have decided is important as parents is to make sure that our children are culturally aware about certain things like movies. We take this job very seriously. That means that we showed our children the Star Wars movies in machete order. There was a debate in Stars Wars land about how to view the movies. Do you show them in order of when they were released or in episode order? You do neither of these things. You show them in machete order, meaning episode 4, 5, then 2 and 3 from the prequel trilogy and then 6. You skip the first movie because of Jar-Jar Binks because he is an annoying character.

Over Thanksgiving we started watching the Lord of the Rings trilogy. We are watching the extended versions so we are still watching! The Lord of the Rings is set in the fictional world of middle-earth and follows Frodo and Sam and the fellowship on a quest to destroy the one ring. In the last movie, the hobbit Pippin asks the wizard Gandalf, “Is there any hope for Frodo and Sam?” Gandalf says, “There never was much hope. Just a fool’s hope.”

Our scripture for today begins in a pretty dark place. There is not much hope left in Jeremiah’s time. Just a fool’s hope. There was death and terror and sadness everywhere. Imagine the bombed out cities of modern day Syria or the fire ravaged hills of California or the whole country of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. It is around 600 years before Jesus was born and Jerusalem has been completely devastated by the Babylonian invasion. The Hebrew people, including Jeremiah, have been scattered from their homeland, living as conquered people in Babylonian captivity. The people have no idea if they will live to see their home again.

People wonder where God is in the midst of this. Why did such devastation happen? Is God still with them? When the people feel at their lowest, God speaks an unexpected word of hope. God repeats a promise God had made centuries before to David, a word about healing and security, prosperity and joy, that the line of the kings would not die out (2 Samuel 7:8-17). In the face of devastation, with all evidence to the contrary, Jeremiah insists that God’s promises are certain.

READ SCRIPTURE. 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. 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 that is now lying in ruins. 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.”

There may be just a fool’s hope, but God wants them to remember to not give up hope yet. God is going to raise up a descendent from David’s line and this righteous branch will do what God’s leaders are supposed to do. This descendent will act righteously and defend justice, and save God’s people and they will live in safety.

At Advent we recognize that Jesus’ work isn’t done yet. We are still waiting for the full realization of God’s kingdom here on earth when we are reconciled to one another and there is a new heaven and a new earth. Today we are frustrated with our broken world, with the profound ache in our human hearts for all things to be restored and made whole. Sometimes the only thing left to do is hold on to each other, pray, dance in the darkness, and wait for the light. Advent is about the fool’s hope. Advent is about a God who weeps with us and gathers us to God’s self as a mother hen gathers her chicks. Advent is about picking up a small stone to move the mountain in small acts of faithfulness.

The question for us is what message are we going to have more influence in our life? Fear or hope? It can feel like our country is coming apart at the seams and that it has never been this bad before. The people in Jeremiah’s time felt like that. They felt like nothing good would ever happen again. Jeremiah is inviting us to remember the word of God, the word of hope.

God reminds me that in the midst of darkness, there is hope. There might not be much, and it might be a fool’s hope, but it is a hope that God isn’t done with us yet. My husband Lee and I watch a scary show where the humans are more dangerous than the zombies, called The Walking Dead. After the death of a beloved character on the show, they showed a mural that had been painted on a wall. The mural was a line from a Leonard Cohen song called Anthem. “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” That light is a hope that God’s grace has more work to do in and through us.

The God we serve calls virgins to give birth, calls shepherds to be kings, frees oppressed people from slavery, hears people in the desert and provides streams of flowing water to save one life. We serve a God that can equip us to face any challenge that is before us. The God we serve has called us by name to do everything in our power to share the love of Jesus with everyone we possibly can. To share the work of compassion with those who are hurting, encouragement with those who are afraid, solidarity with those who are oppressed, resistance to evil, forgiveness for those who have wronged us, and acceptance of all of God’s people. We do this work because we know Christ’s resurrection has already changed the world. We act because God’s promises are trustworthy.

We begin with hope. It isn’t a hope that life will return to way that it used to, but a hope for complete renewal. It is hope for new life from a dead stump. It is hope while the city is being destroyed and the doors are crashing in. It is hope about a coming future that completely shapes the present. It is hope grounded in God’s action. It is fulfilment of God’s promises that God has already made to the people.

I see signs of hope in the ministries of this church, in children who are so excited to be here because they feel the love of God in this place. I see signs of hope when we sing songs together and I feel the Holy Spirit in this place. I see signs of hope in adults wanting to grow in their faith together. I see signs of hope in youth who come to this place because they feel welcome and safe in this place. I see signs of hope when we love our neighbors and focus on the good that we see in one another. I see signs of hope when we share Communion together and we build a longer table. I love Rachel Held Evans words in her book, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*, “This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more.”

Mother Teresa said, “I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that God will guide me to do whatever I’m supposed to do, whatever I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I’m praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things.”

Advent invites us to name the places in our lives and society that are at odds with the divine vision of justice and righteousness. There may be a wide gap between what is and what we wish were so. And yet the promise of Advent is that the Lord is our righteousness. This promise allows us to proclaim an alternative reality in which all things will be made new. In these days of waiting for Christmas, may we choose hope over fear so we can learn again how to trust in the promises of God for our world and for our own hearts. God is always making something new, thanks be to God, Amen.