

Sermon – Dec. 1, 2019

“Promised in Hope”

Text: Jeremiah 33:14-18

The Christian liturgical season has turned, and Advent is staring us in the face. When talking about Advent, Walter Brueggemann writes, *“Advent invites us to awaken from our numbed endurance and our domesticated expectations, to consider our life afresh in light of new gifts that God is about to give.”* As the curtain rises on this first Sunday of Advent, we see the prophet Jeremiah on centre stage bringing us a new gift that God is about to give - conveying a message of hope. It is important to listen to Jeremiah and to give him space in the pulpit today. It is relevant to revisit his story which I believe still speaks to both our individual and communal lives.

Prophets of ancient times like Jeremiah speak to us as we go through this season of Advent. Who are prophets? What are they doing in this season of supposedly joyful celebration? Why do we need to listen to them? A prophet is more than a seer, a predictor of the future, or one gifted with extraordinary spiritual and moral insight. A prophet is very much someone who lives in the present, looks around the community and addresses issues of concern. Prophets see injustice, poverty, political upheavals, religious callousness, immorality of all sorts. Lorrie calls them social analysts. They open their mouth to protest and wag their finger to warn those in power and calls for repentance and transformation. Theologian Deborah Block explains that *“prophets are voices of Advent because they say what no one wants to hear and believe. They point in directions no one wants to look. Prophets hear God when everybody else has concluded God is silent. They see God where nobody else would guess that God is present. They feel God’s compassion for us, God’s anger with us, and God’s joy in us. they dream God’s dreams and utter wake up calls. They hope God’s hopes and announce a new future. They sing God’s song and interrupts the program with a change of tune.”*

Jeremiah uttered some daring words. After all, he is the prophet of doom and encouragement. He has a well-earned reputation for being blunt when it comes to politics and religion. His oracles or prophetic words are full of warnings and threats. Jeremiah was the most

misunderstood prophet in his time. He was rejected by his own people. He was imprisoned and persecuted for speaking the truth. He was starved, tortured and wished he had not lived to see that day. He wept for his people when Jerusalem was colonized by foreign invaders, hence the book of Lamentations was attributed to him. He was a prophet on the edge and felt abandoned by God over and over again. In this particular passage that we have heard today, Jeremiah speaks to a people from prison which seem to be at the end of its rope. Politically it was a fearful time. It was the beginning of the 6th century BCE and the army of the Babylonians is at the gates of Jerusalem ready to colonize. Jeremiah is convinced that Jerusalem will fall, and he has been saying so loudly and publicly.

The symbol in Jeremiah's oracle that offers hope is *a righteous branch*. Right there, in jail, he is talking in hopeful terms: '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.' Just when all seems lost and Israel is staring into the abyss, Jeremiah discerns hope and a future, comfort and promise. He speaks of a righteous Branch springing up. Consider that image, of a shoot of new life – picture it appearing defiantly on a piece of wasteland, or maybe budding off the fallen trunk of an old tree. That branch, that shoot, is a gesture of hope in a desolate and deathly landscape. There, in the midst of unimaginable death and destruction there appears this beautiful, fruitful Branch. Because that is how God works. When all seems lost, a branch springs up, new life emerges. And even the worst pessimist becomes a bearer of hope.

Who is this righteous Branch that would appear? At the Lectionary Group last Tuesday, we offered some options. Some contend it was a king or a military leader - a descendant of David, a tradition in Israel that the dynasty of the great King David would endure forever. Jeremiah tells the people in desolation about God showing up to keep a promise and gift the people with a leader that will lead the people with "justice and righteousness." This leader will "save" Judah and grant "safety" to Jerusalem." With God's promise comes the hope for restoration and shalom. This was Jeremiah's vision.

Another possibility of who this righteous branch might be the community of God's people. You see the king is not enough as a sign of hope. A king needs a people. And note that they are

named after him. He is a righteous Branch and they will be called 'The Lord is our righteousness.' The community of God's people become a sign of life and hope— as Israel was always intended to be. Jeremiah, like the other prophets believe that God's covenanted people called the remnants from the exile will bring back peace and harmony in the land.

Someone offered in our discussion that another interpretation of the righteous branch might be Jesus whose birth we are celebrating at Christmas. Matthew must know this passage in Jeremiah and readily connects Jesus to the line of David. This interpretation that Jesus as the righteous branch might contain a beautiful promise, especially for us in the Christian faith, but it also poses some danger. The danger is reading the New Testament into the Old Testament in a way that nullifies or negates the original text. The danger is when such readings lead us to discard the Old Testament as irrelevant and with it the Jews, the people of faith who still claim it as their ultimate testimony of who God is for them. If interpreted this way that Jesus is the righteous branch, Jeremiah must be a super-prophet who can look into the future 500 years from his time. However, if we look at Jesus the Jewish man who came to live his life as a faithful rabbi, how he preached justice and righteousness in the name of God, we certainly can contend that Jesus is a righteous branch in his own right even without looking back at the prophets in the Old Testament.

In the Christian context, what if this righteous branch could also mean - the community of the faithful? The body of Christ as we call it? I believe that Jesus is risen and alive in the world through us. You and me, together, faithful communities together. We are Christ's living, breathing, body for the world. If we think this way, the meaning of Advent will draw in fresh and noble meanings. Advent is no longer just about preparing to welcome the birth of Jesus who will bring justice and righteousness in the world but it is also about preparing to discover who we are as a faith community. Through our acts of love, our advocacy for compassion and peace, we become a righteous branch who will bring justice and righteousness to the places and people that need healing and restoration.

We are aware of the lack of hope in many places and people. No hope restores a home to the aboriginal children placed in residential schools or given up for adoption. There a sense of

hopelessness for the families affected by death due to bullying or suicide. There is lack of hope to solve the ongoing impact of climate change unless we pay attention to the cries of young Greta Thunberg and her cohorts. There is seemingly no hope for those who have lost their homes due to fire or to earthquakes or to wars. Sometimes it is so easy to point fingers at God who some of us believe causes diseases, poverty, injustice and deaths to happen in the world. But instead of blaming God or the political or religious leaders of our times, I think we need to ask these questions ourselves. What can we do about eradicating poverty and injustice in the world? What can we do to heal the brokenness in the world? What can we do to lessen the need for grieving? How can we contribute positively in caring for the earth? I believe that we are called by God to be a righteous branch – to be bearers of hope to a broken world.

How can we be “choirs of hope?” This is a question borrowed from Walter Brueggemann. I dare you to be choirs of hope singing with Jeremiah to be optimistic in a seemingly pessimistic world. May hope ring through us in a way that it is heard around the world. May we recognize the humanity in every person and in the words of St. Francis of Assisi, “Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.” We need Jesus to be born again in the midst of these struggles, and for us the Body of Christ to place itself in the center of these struggles. As we gather around this table of grace, I give thanks for listening to Jeremiah’s voice. I give thanks for Jesus whose birth ushers in a world of love and peace. I give thanks for this community of the faithful who continues to embody Jesus the Christ as a living promoter of justice and righteousness. I give thanks for hope, and I pray for an Advent that will help us discover our true calling. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources that helped me with my sermon:

1. BCUC Lectionary Group
2. Walter Brueggemann
3. The essay of Rev. Deborah Block on prophets.