

## ***“Branches of Hope”***

First Sermon in the Advent Series: *Proclamation & Promise: The Prophetic Voices of Advent*  
*Jeremiah 33:14-18*

New Revised Standard Version

*\*This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermonic moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

This First Sunday of Advent we continue with the Narrative Lectionary and begin a new series, *Proclamation & Promise: The Prophetic Voices of Advent*. The voice that leads the way for us is Jeremiah. Jeremiah is a powerful prophetic voice, albeit a very unpopular one. But really, what prophet is ever popular with the people? Prophets aren't popular because they bring a message that calls into question people's priorities and loyalties. Which, as we've seen, have not always been "on the mark." But, thanks be to God, God cares more about promise than popularity, more about our potential than our past. The people could put prophets out of a job if they'd just worship God, hold their kings accountable, and change their lives. Easy enough, right?

Now if you were here last week, you may be thinking, but wait - didn't King Josiah re-discover the Torah, the book of Law, for his people and didn't they repent and commit again to the covenant? Well...yes, kind of. Nothing is ever that cut and dry, especially when we fickle humans are involved.

It is true that under King Josiah there were great reforms being made. King Josiah was one of the most celebrated rulers of Judah's history.<sup>1</sup> And the prophet Jeremiah was born during Josiah's time, but by the time we get to today's text, Josiah hasn't been King for a while. We're at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. We've gone from King Josiah to King Jehoiakim, King Jehoiachin, and now we're at King Zedekiah. And while there was

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Wrenn, "Commentary on Jeremiah 33:14-18," *Working Preacher* (Dec. 1, 2019), accessed on Dec. 1, 2019 at

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4219](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4219).

some respite during King Josiah's time, the people are now in (arguably) the darkest time of Judah's history. Which is saying a lot, because we've seen some dark times already, haven't we?

So what's *this* darkness all about?

Israel sat on a trade route between two massive empires, Egypt and Babylon/Assyria (roughly modern-day Iraq). Consequently, Israel was in constant danger of being conquered, subjected, and even destroyed. And that's exactly what happened. After centuries of idolatry and oppressive practices of Judean kings and elite, God withdrew the "divine protective power" that Scripture says had been given to God's people and the unrelenting armies of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

The siege lasted over a year. Ultimately Jerusalem fell, and its king and those in power were exiled to Babylon. But until its fall, the citizens of Jerusalem were trapped, suffocating in a city that was

rapidly running out of food and water and even more rapidly acquiring sickness and disease. In fact, in our text for today, Jeremiah himself is languishing in a prison attached to King Zedekiah's palace (Jeremiah 32:1-3).<sup>3</sup> He's writing from jail just as the Apostle Paul did centuries later.

He was imprisoned for angering the king by speaking God's truth to royal power (Jeremiah 32:3-5), Jeremiah has been lamenting to God that the city is going to fall, and that God will do nothing to help. Well, God responds to Jeremiah's lament with a promise of redemption and healing for Israel in Jeremiah 33:6-18, part of which we read today.<sup>4</sup> (We're not reading Jeremiah's laments, but trust me, there's plenty of them in the rest of Jeremiah if you want to read them this week.)

Jeremiah 33:14-15 records God's promises for the future restoration of the community. We hear in these verses that God promises to raise up a true ruler once and for all: a "*righteous Branch will spring*

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<sup>2</sup> Wrenn, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Wrenn, *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Wrenn, *ibid.*

*up for David and this Branch  
shall execute justice and  
righteousness in the  
land...Judah will be saved;  
Jerusalem will live in safety.”*

No promise would look sweeter than this one when your people are dying in the streets, being carted off to exile, and your land being overrun. It is beyond imagination really...a powerful promise of hope.

And it almost seems “Pollyanna-ish” given the dire circumstances. But remember *who* is proclaiming this promise. Jeremiah’s proclamation has power because of his own lived experience. He’s not an outsider who’s coming in and saying, “*Don’t worry, be happy! It’s all going to be okay!*” Rather, Jeremiah’s words bear the weight of his own worry and his own suffering. Which makes them real. He’s in prison as he writes. He’s in a place where many would argue that Hope has been taken from you...and yet he still proclaims it.

In the face of imminent national collapse and great personal suffering, the witness of Jeremiah is profound. He is a prophet who is both deeply troubled and deeply hopeful all at the same time.<sup>5</sup> Which is very relatable. Maybe it’s how you feel today; some moments are swallowed up in the black hole of “all that is wrong with the world” (and in your life) and other moments where you’re able to see the Light, the possibilities, the Change, or all that is “right” with the world. Jeremiah helps us feel less alone in these “see-saw” emotions and as a prophet he is not alone in his predicament, or his promise.

The promise in today’s passage reminds us of the hope we read in Isaiah two weeks ago. In Isaiah 11:1 we read the promise that “*a shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of its roots...*” The Hebrew word for branch here is not identical to the word branch in Jeremiah 33 but it’s close enough to Jeremiah 33 to know they are

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<sup>5</sup> Rolf Jacobson, Craig R. Koester, & Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, “Podcast #383 - Promise of the Messiah,” *I Love to Tell the Story* (Nov. 23, 2019),

accessed on Dec. 1, 2019 at [https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative\\_podcast.aspx?podcast\\_id=1200](https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1200).

talking about the same  
“branch” of hope here.

And even further back in Isaiah 5:7, remember when Isaiah has God lament, *“I expected justice but saw bloodshed, righteousness but heard a cry...”* Well that lament ties directly to this promise in Jeremiah 33 too...because what shall this Branch in Jeremiah 33 do? The Branch *“shall do justice and righteousness in the land...[in fact the Branch] will be called The Lord is our righteousness.”* The very thing that caused God lament in Isaiah 5 is now what God uses to give hope: righteousness. The people lack it, but God has it in abundance. We can imagine that Jeremiah is conscious that he is living in the same city that Isaiah did...and that the promise Isaiah proclaimed is the same promise that he reiterates here...the same promise that we cling to today...that despite what we see before our eyes: there is a different reality to which God calls...to which God wants to save us.

The Hebrew word for “saved” that we read in verse 16 (“In those days Judah will be saved,”) is “yasha’.” Five hundred years after God saved the Judeans from their Babylonian exile, a child is born, and his parents name him “Yeshua,” or “Jesus,” meaning “God saves.”<sup>6</sup>

This connection is one of the ways we as Christians make sense of verse 17 with its promise that, *“Never shall there be an end to [the line of] David, a man sitting upon the throne of the house of Israel.”* We believe this man “who will save” to be Jesus.

The discrepancy between the recorded promises of God in Jeremiah’s time and the lack of an Israelite king in Jesus’ time is perhaps one of the reasons why Luke and Matthew take such pains to record the lineage of Jesus through King David.<sup>7</sup> They are trying to tie Jesus to David and they do, believing Jesus to be the Messiah, the Anointed One.

Lest we think this makes Christianity superior to

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<sup>6</sup> Wrenn, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Wrenn, *ibid.*

Judaism, scholar Rachel Wrenn points out another beautiful part of today's text: *"[Even as we Christians have taken this Branch to mean Jesus, the Messiah, we know that] our Jewish sisters and brothers have wrestled and reckoned with this verse in their own tradition, and have come to different answers. But instead of pitting the traditions against each other, perhaps there is a kinship-rope knotting us together in the final two verses of this text: the first (verse 17) a promise for a king of the line of David, and the second (verse 18) a promise that 'there shall also be no end to the line of Levitical priests before [God].'"* While we Christians might claim the Messiah as Jesus [or King] in our tradition, we can never lay claim to the Levitical birthright or Priestly office that verse 18 lifts up. And if we accept verse 17 as fulfilled prophecy, should we not also accept verse 18? [Perhaps] God does not privilege the Christian tradition over the Jewish one. But rather, taken together, these verses tip us toward a sense of kinship, a promise of God which is fulfilled in multiple ways and

*which includes even more than we could possibly imagine."*

Isn't that beautiful?

*That* in and of itself is a Branch of Hope. To know that God can work in ways beyond what we can comprehend or imagine. Ways that include rather than exclude.

In the end, the proclamation of Jeremiah in this text is clear: In the urgency of imminent national collapse, he believes that God will show up and bring about righteousness and justice in the land. This Hope is a Branch that Jeremiah names, *"The Lord is our Righteousness."* That Branch is not a fulfilled promise in Jeremiah's day, but a coming promise upon which he can rest his Hope, and as we saw, his salvation, his 'saving.'

"To the Church Fathers, Advent, meaning "coming," was the right naming of the season when light and life are fading. [So way back when ] they urged the faithful to set aside four weeks to fast, give, and pray—which are all ways to strip down [our pride and ego and] to let the bared

soul...know what Jesus called “the one thing necessary”: that there is One who is the source of all life, the One who comes to be with us and in us, even, especially, in the midst of darkness and death. One who brings a new beginning.”<sup>8</sup> A Branch springing forth from a stump is a New Beginning.

The prophets gave a proclamation: things as they are now are not the way God wants them to be. They longed for a new beginning.

And they also gave a promise. Isaiah and Jeremiah both tell us a Branch will spring forth...a Branch of Hope...a Branch that will save...a Branch that will remind us that God has not forgotten us, that God loves us unconditionally and yes, even, irrationally. Given the Israelite behavior and our behavior we’ve lost all reason for God to love us and yet God loves us still. Because God’s love, as we will see in the person of Jesus Christ, operates very differently than human love. God’s love just is. No conditions, no exclusions.

If this is the ultimate gift of Christmas (God made Flesh in the babe Jesus), then this Advent, in this season of waiting and coming, how can we offer Branches of Hope to the world?

Today, as you go out into the snow-covered landscape of Colorado, look at the branches around you. Weighted with melting, dripping snow. Branches on the trees glistening in the sunlight. Branches on the ground crackling under your feet. Look at those branches. And when you see them, allow those Branches to be a sign of hope to you, a reminder that God has not given up on the world or on you.

They are not just signs of Hope for you and me. They are signs of Hope for the world. We must extend them.

Is the Branch of Hope you extend one of Comfort? Perhaps by providing a Monday meal for those experiencing homelessness in our Bootstraps & Blessings ministry?

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<sup>8</sup> Gayle Boss, *All Creation Waits: The Advent Mystery of New Beginnings*, illus. by David G. Klein (Paraclete Press: 2016), xi-xii.

Is the Branch of Hope you extend one of Justice? Perhaps by showing up next Sunday afternoon for the Candlelight Vigil hosted by Colorado Faith Communities United to End Gun Violence?

Is the Branch of Hope you extend one of Joy? Perhaps by inviting a friend to join you at the Calvary Christmas Concert next Sunday evening?

Is the Branch of Hope you extend one of Healing? Perhaps even to yourself? By creating time in your schedule and vulnerability in your heart to attend the Advent Healing & Wholeness Service to just sit and be and allow the complex emotions of this season not be dismissed, but rather embraced?

Is the Branch of Hope you extend one of Sabbath? Perhaps intentionally not making this a season of 'to-dos' and 'partys' and 'shopping' and 'events' - but maybe a season where you say 'No' more than you say 'Yes?'

Is the Branch of Hope you extend one of Proclamation? Perhaps by giving voice to your faith in the public sphere - speaking out on the politics of our day in ways that show your faith in Christ as something that guides every aspect of your life and of our communal life together?

Is the Branch of Hope you extend one of Promise? Perhaps by allowing yourself to not have easy answers to life's difficulties but rather to sit in the 'uncertainty' and the 'not knowing' of these times...whatever that means for you...without anxiety or an incessant drive to find answers. But rather, to let yourself sit in this darkness and unknowing until you let go of control and the 'need to know' until God can really come into your life and speak a new word to you?

Father Richard Rohr writes: "*In some ways [Advent] is like learning to 'see in the dark.' We can't be certain of what's in front of us, but with some time and patience, our eyes adjust, and we can make out the next right move.*"<sup>9</sup> Not the entirety

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<sup>9</sup> From Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation on Dec. 1, 2019 accessed on Dec. 1, 2019 at

<https://cac.org/waiting-and-unknowing-2019-12-01/>. Adapted from Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell, *The*

of the future, but the *next* right move.

In the uncertainty of life, extending branches of hope can help us know the “next right move” or at least, it can help us hold on a little longer until that next right move is revealed. Jeremiah knew this, even in the midst of devastation and despair. But he didn’t know it on his own. He had to let God reveal it to him. That’s the thing about prophets. They speak God’s words, not their own. And they are schooled in patience, for they are often very impatient about the injustices around them.

You know, sometimes we can read scriptures like Jeremiah 33 and think “isn’t that nice?” but things are different today...we can’t really have prophets like Jeremiah now or hope like that now. But is that true? I think that thinking can be a cop-out. Perhaps we have more in common with Bible times than we think.

Alfred Delp, a German Jesuit priest who was part of the German Resistance and who

was executed for his resistance by the Nazi regime in a death camp in 1945, was a prophet in his land and day. He spoke out and gave voice to a proclamation of justice in the midst of evil injustice. Like Jeremiah, he was a man whose life gave his proclamation credence. He believed so much in his message that he died because of it. He did not live to see the end of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime, but then again, have any of us? We still see sparks of these flames igniting today...sometimes in one person, sometimes in groups of people online or in public demonstrations or in hate crimes. The evil and the darkness still exist around us. The question is - will prophetic resistant voices like Alfred’s still rise up? His voice was a Branch of Hope in his time.

At the time of his arrest, December 1944, Father Delp didn’t lament his situation. Instead he wrote of Hope. Perhaps his words on Advent can be our Collective Branch of Hope that we cling to this day. From his prison he writes,

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*Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*  
(Whitaker House: 2016), 100-101; and

Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*.



*“Advent is the time of promise;  
it is not yet the time of  
fulfillment...Space is still filled  
with the noise of destruction  
and annihilation, the shouts of  
self-assurance and arrogance,  
the weeping of despair and  
helplessness. But round about  
the horizon the eternal realities  
stand silent in their age-old  
longing. There shines on them  
already the first mild light of  
the radiant fulfillment to come.  
From afar sound the first notes  
of pipes and voices, not yet  
discernable as a song or  
melody. It is all far off still, and  
only just announced and  
foretold. But it is happening,  
today.”<sup>10</sup>...it is coming...this  
hope...*

There’s the promise, my  
friends. What will be our  
proclamation?

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Fr. Alfred Delp. *Advent of the Heart: Seasonal Sermons and Prison Writings*. Ignatius Press, 1944.