

## **Jeremiah 33:14-16**

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."\*

## **The Lord is Our Righteousness** - November 28, 2021

*Jeremiah 33:14-16*

Today the countdown begins. I mean the real countdown. Not the countdown that started on Black Friday or November first or even earlier than that. Yes, all those days are about shopping. They're all about buying stuff. They're all about adding to our collection of things we may or may not really need in life.

For Christians, today starts the only countdown that matters. Today is the first day of Advent. In just a four short weeks, we will be ready to welcome Jesus Christ into the world once again. Yes, Christmastime is fun. Yes it's great to see friends and family and give and receive presents and generally have a break from the pace of the world. It is good to simply enjoy life and living and focussing on people and not work for a change.

But if Christmas is just an excuse to relax, shop, and party, then what does they church have to do with it? What does Jesus have to do with it, anyway? I'm sure you're aware that Christmas is celebrated by people who consider themselves followers of Jesus and a huge number who haven't the faintest idea who Jesus is. It seems almost contradictory to use the word "serious" in the context of Christmas. After all what is serious about having fun? What is serious about gathering with friends and family? What is serious about celebrating a birthday? Well, nothing<sup>6</sup>, to be honest. Many of the events and traditions we keep at this season are hardly serious at all.

Yet, here I am talking about the seriousness of Advent and why as Christians we need to keep in mind that there is much, much more to this holiday than just the fun and presents.

The more years we have spent on this earth, the more we realize that that is much more to life and living than simply making money and having a good time. Of course, many people do live life simply for themselves and try their best to ignore the wider issues facing humanity. There are many who love to put metaphorical fingers in their ears and shout "blah, blah, blah" in order to keep the world away from their pristine, ordered, problem-free lives.

And for some people, it works. Some people can get away with ignoring the problems confronting others and succeed in living pretty much for themselves. Such people usually have money and secure jobs. Most, dare I say, are white. They tend to live in rich countries and have access to quality healthcare. If that is your situation or the situation of someone you know, then yes, ignoring the world is an easy thing to do.

However, a money-filled, problem free, easy-living world is not the place most people live in, is it? If we are to be honest with ourselves, the problems of our families and friends, the problems of the nation and world have a nasty habit of busting in on us at very inconvenient times. We are well acquainted with tragedies and crises invading our well-ordered existence and it then we have to remove our metaphorical fingers from our ears and stop shouting "blah, blah, blah" and really wake up and pay attention to what is going on.

I'm certainly not trying to be a downer or a spoilsport during this festive season. Nonetheless, I can't stop thinking about my cousin who died on Thanksgiving from COVID, leaving behind a wife and two teenaged

children. He had by all accounts a very satisfying, comfortable life and now in the space of a few weeks, it is gone.

Life happens, friends, for better and for worse. The great lie of our age is that our science and technology has somehow insulated or protected us from the sometimes painful realities of life. Nice houses, fancy cars, and big bank accounts make no difference when your body doesn't respond to medication. They don't help when a fire or earthquake or flood wipe away your home in a few seconds. While we in our country have not had to deal with the impact of an invading army for centuries, wars and invasions and government upheavals are a normal part of life and living in many parts of the world.

My parents were depression babies. They were born in the 1930s and were acquainted first hand with starvation and poor housing and having to scrimp and save to survive. They lived through World War II wondering if the nation would survive. Their reality always kept them aware of how precarious life could be and they always harbored a fear that things could dramatically change at any time. I was raised during the 1960s and every day in elementary school we practiced air raids at 2pm, ducking under our desks in case our town was bombed by the Russians. The periodic shelter-in-place and lockdown drills we have at my school in our current time remind me that things can go wrong in a hurry and we can't ignore reality.

So why am I being so down today when we are looking forward to Christmas? I do not want to be down, I do, however, want to be real. The truth is that in many parts of the world, even in our nation, people are dealing with all kinds of problems that wishful thinking will not eliminate. In many ways, our lives are not terribly different from those of the Israelites 2500 years ago who were facing upheaval and destruction on an unprecedented scale.

Today we hear from the prophet Jeremiah. If you've been following our Daily Prayer services, you are aware that Jeremiah had the worst job in the world. God chose him to tell Israel and Judah that God was going to allow them to be destroyed by invading armies because they rejected God and God's ways. For over thirty years, Jeremiah warned and warned and warned. He got kings and wealthy citizens upset. He was beaten, thrown into jail, thrown down wells, spat upon and ridiculed all for speaking the truth.

And finally, sadly, Jeremiah's warnings came true. Israel was defeated. Judah was invaded by Babylon. The city of Jerusalem and the Temple of God were destroyed. People were scattered, fleeing for their lives. Other were captured and taken into captivity. It truly was end of the world for Israel. The Day of the Lord had come and everything was turned upside down.

Haven't our lives been turned upside down, not just once but many times? Perhaps we've lost a job, perhaps a relationship. Perhaps a close friend or family member has died unexpectedly. Perhaps our health has deteriorated beyond the power of doctors to help. Perhaps our community or nation or world has fallen victim to climate change, flood, drought, fire, earthquake, or war. Our worlds do turn upside down, don't they?

The question for us is not whether our worlds will turn upside down, but when they will turn upside down because, like it or not, it's going to happen. I'm not being pessimistic, I'm being realistic.

The question therefore is what are we going to do about it? How do we live with so much uncertainty facing us?

As we begin this season of Advent, the most important thing we can keep in mind is that Jesus is about hope. There is nothing we need more in our lives than hope because when things are going bad in life, we need some assurance, some certainty that whatever problems we are facing at the moment are not the way it is going to be forever.

In today's scripture, Jeremiah is bringing a new message to the people of Israel. After preaching and prophesying the destruction of the nation, he suddenly changes. Instead of preaching doom, he proclaims that God is still with the people in spite of everything. Although the nation lay in ruins, God is not finished with Israel. In fact, Jeremiah proclaims a new future, a better future, a changed future. And that is surely good news.

This new hope, this new Israel, this new way of living will be the essence of righteousness. Jeremiah told the people that a new day would come to Israel, a future guided by the Lord. A Lord whom Jeremiah calls righteous. To be righteous is to follow in God's ways. And God's ways are simple, aren't they? Love God, love your neighbor just like you love yourself. In other words, Jeremiah had confidence that the people of Israel, devastated by war and destruction, would learn how to follow God and walk in God's ways and make God's priorities their priorities. Finally, finally, finally, they would learn their lesson and when that happened, God would restore Israel.

And that is indeed what happened! Seventy years after Babylon destroyed the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, the people returned. As we learn in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people returned and amazingly, the king of Persia (now called Iran) paid for the restoration of the city! What a turn of events! What a confirmation of hope! What an assurance that even when things look at their worst, God is on our side.

Now, because God was on the side of the nation of Israel, despite all they did to ignore God and go against God and God's Laws, how much more should we be confident that the coming of Jesus into our lives means that no matter how bad things seem right now, we can trust in the love and mercy of God. Things are going to change and things are going to get better. Most importantly, we can live life with the knowledge that we don't have to deal with life's problems alone.

As followers of Christ, we have made a choice. We have chosen to reject the world and its priorities and its warped diseased way of looking at things and instead embrace Jesus' way. A much better way.

Think of how the world looks at Christmas: shopping, competition, trying to outdo each other in sheer extravagance! I mean look at TV. There is a program called "The Great Christmas Light Fight!" Imagine, an innocent tradition of lighting a few lights outside our houses to symbolize Jesus as the light of the world has devolved in a "fight" — a competition as to who can have the most, the biggest, the brightest, the most

expensive show. Is a “light fight” appropriate, is it necessary, does it have anything to do with Jesus? No. Now I’m not telling you not to decorate your homes, far from it. But the point is not to be the best or win an award. All we do should be for is to honor Jesus, not show off to our neighbors.

There is another show called the “Christmas Baking War!” Imagine, the mixing the idea of war with the idea of Christmas? Can anything be further from war than the birth of Jesus? By all means, bake, cook, be artistic, use your creative talents. But do it in a way that shows your love for God and neighbor — not to exalt yourself! Christmas is about hope for the world as revealed in Jesus, not hearing the accolades of people. I love the song “Little Drummer Boy” because that is what Christmas giving should be. A poor boy plays his drum for the baby Jesus because that is the gift he could bring. Simple and true.

So where is hope today? What can we say to people who have lost their loved ones to COVID, or disease or fire, or violence, or so many other ways human beings have devised to destroy each other? What is the Christmas message for those who are at the bottom and for those who are dead? Why not just party now because something horrible might happen tomorrow?

The Christmas message is one of hope on so many levels. Consider that Jesus entered the world as a poor baby born in a stable, how much lower can you go? Yet his birth shows the God is with the least, poorest, worst off of all people. When we feel like we’ve lost everything, remember Jesus was born with nothing and rarely had anything of value in his life. Jesus knows exactly how it feels to have nothing of material value in life.

At the end of the Jesus’ journey we begin at Christmastime is, of course, the joy of resurrection at Easter. For Christians, Easter is our last, best hope for our future. Because of Jesus, we have hope that the deaths of our bodies is not the end of our lives. Death does not win. Death does not have the final say. In Jesus, we continue to live because despite all the evil the world threw at him, including whips, and spears, and nails, Jesus defeated death and gives hope to us all.

Friends, the Christian message does not make sense in our supposedly scientific, logical, technological world. In our time, believing in miracles is ridiculous and praying for them is a waste of time. Yet, yet, yet. If the hope the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Israel after they were destroyed was a lie, why is Israel still here today? It must mean that over the past 2500 years, Jeremiah’s prophecy of restoration and righteousness must have taken place not just once but hundreds and millions of times for people in similar circumstances all around the world. I mean if Jeremiah’s prophecy applied only to that one restoration event so long ago, it would be easy to say, so what, that was then, this is now. Why should we care about what God did way back when?

But the Advent season exists to reopen our minds, hearts, and spirits to the truth that Jesus is Lord and is real and can and does do far more for us than we can imagine. Christmas is not about presents with a “t” it is about presence, the presence of Christ in our lives every day, walking with us, restoring us, giving us new hope, new life, new possibilities.

Now is the time to prepare yourself for hope beyond hope, a future beyond imagination, and a life that will never end. Jesus is coming. Hallelujah! Let us get ready!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.