

THE DAYS ARE SURELY COMING...

Jeremiah 33:14-16

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The Bible is not an easy book to read or understand. Sometimes the language seems so odd, the situations addressed so different and distant from our own that we wonder if there is any possible connection between our world and these words.

The prophet Jeremiah is speaking to the people of Israel after its nation was conquered, after its capital city of Jerusalem was destroyed. Six hundred years before Jesus was born, the people of Israel were carried off to exile in Babylon, after many warnings by the prophets, including Jeremiah, that their failure to live faithfully, to live in justice and righteousness, would bring their downfall.

Once, under the great King David, Israel had been a formidable political and military power, and its people still remembered those glory days and longed for their return. Now, their king was no more, their glory was only a dim memory. They could not imagine a future for themselves or their children. Hope was gone, they were living in despair.

It's at that moment, right there in the midst of despair, that the prophet arises, the prophet who is also a poet with an imagination and a deep sense of call to proclaim - that despite desolation, destruction, and loss - the promise of God's future is yet taking shape.

In the midst of the terrible suffering of the people, with Jerusalem destroyed and the temple in ruins, Jeremiah doesn't heap more misery on the people; instead, he offers them something to grasp, a hope to which they can cling. In fact, the prophet's

voice takes such a dramatic turn that chapters 30-33 in Jeremiah are called the Book of Consolation, or the Book of Comfort.

I don't think it takes such a great leap of imagination for us to empathize with Jeremiah's original audience. Haven't we seen, at least on our tv screens, images we can't forget: the smoking rubble of the World Trade Center, a jagged scar on the earth in eastern Pennsylvania, a gaping hole in the side of a burning Pentagon?

And we've never really been the same since, have we? Our nation sustained a spiritual wound just as much as a physical one on that day. We can now empathize with the suffering of other places - Europe after both world wars, cities in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq over the past decades, and right now Yemen experiencing war and famine.

Times of crisis sometimes bring out the best in people, but in our case, the awareness that we are not immune from national tragedy seems to have divided us.

Yes, we understand the despair of our ancestors who mourned the loss of the homeland they had loved. This is a time when the Bible seems perfectly relatable.

We, too, worry about the world we are leaving to our children and grandchildren. And our anxiety might even be more acute as our knowledge of science and our awareness of global events increase.

And yet. We are still people with a choice to make. We are here this morning, and we have already lit a candle proclaiming ourselves to be people of hope.

The choice is not between optimism and pessimism. Not exactly. Some of us are just wired to be more positive; it's easier for some of us. It's not a matter of how much news you ingest; some of us can take more than others. But we can all choose to live with hope. That is a choice.

Our hope is rooted in our belief that God is with us always. The word “Emmanuel” means “God is with us.” The psalmist tells us that there is nowhere we can go to escape God’s presence. There is nothing we can do that will cause God to stop loving us. The book of Romans says, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” It is that assurance, that reassurance that we are not alone, that gives us hope.

And if we are people of hope, our behavior changes. And that’s when hope becomes real. That’s when hope takes wing and flies, ushering into God’s new order.

During the rise of Hitler, Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer realized that the German churches could not afford to be apolitical. They needed to actively resist the evils of Nazism. He formed a movement called the Confessing Church which spoke as one voice against the Third Reich. He eventually was executed for conspiring to assassinate Hitler. But this is what he wrote earlier: “There are people who think it frivolous and Christians who think it impious to hope for a better future on earth and to prepare for it. They believe in chaos, disorder, and catastrophe, perceiving it in what is happening now. They withdraw in resignation or pious flight from the world, from the responsibility for ongoing life, for building anew, for the coming generations. It may be that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow; only then and no earlier will we readily lay down our work for a better future.”

I’ve seen this happen, haven’t you? The temptation to withdraw? To escape? I know that temptation in myself. The problems of the world seem overwhelming, there’s no doubt about it. What can I do about Yemen? What can I do about climate change? I might as well just turn off the news and try to enjoy my life as much as I possibly can. We all indulge in that escapism from time to time.

But that's not hope. And that's not the life we are called to. Living in hope means taking action, wherever we are, in whatever sphere of influence we have. Living in hope means teaching our children about generosity, letting them know that not all people live with our kind of pleasures and privileges. Living in hope means leaving our comfort zones, whether that is spending time with people who might be sometimes unpleasant, or shoveling a neighbor's walk when the weather's miserable, or going on a mission trip where you sleep on a cot for a few hours a night.

Donating to the food drive or volunteering at the food pantry helps feed people. Pulling an ornament off our giving tree and purchasing a gift helps strengthen the bonds in our communities. Writing letters to legislators and showing up to march or to protest has been known to eventually, sometimes, lead to changes in laws. Living in hope makes a difference. To hope in Jesus Christ is to hope in a vision for abundant life for all. It is a vision of human flourishing. A vision of a community where all people are valued, where creation itself is loved and protected.

When the church is at its best, it is a seedbed for hope, a place where people can look and say, "There is some hope growing over there...let's have a look at it..." If people outside the church see that there are some seedlings growing here, they will be inspired to plant seeds of their own, and to water and nourish them. The church itself can be a sign of hope for the world, in the world.

We can look to the past for inspiration. How much of the Civil Rights movement was funded by the courageous struggle of the worship and work of the African-American church, and a few others? The Confessing Church in the time of Hitler was sometimes weak but it was the only institution publicly opposed to his regime, the only

one articulating a vision of a different, more hopeful future. In the French village of Le Chambon, pastor Andre Trocme, pastor of the Reformed church, led his people and other citizens of the town to rescue, hide and protect over 5,000 Jews during World War II, risking their lives in the process.

Jeremiah says, "The days are surely coming..." when justice and righteousness will be a reality for all God's people. Jeremiah says it will be like a righteous branch, something green growing where before everything alive had been chopped down.

There is a scene in the story The Secret Garden when a boy named Dickon and his friend Mary explore a wonderful hidden garden. It appears that many branches of the trees and the rose bushes are dead. Everything in the garden looks gray. But Dickon takes out a knife and cuts into a branch, where he finds "a shoot which looked brownish green instead of hard, dry gray" and he assures Mary that, deep inside, the tree is as full of life and promise and hope as these two young people themselves.

A church that lives and breathes hope is a green shoot, holding life and promise no matter what things may look like on the outside. Let us live as people of hope, people who know that even one candle overcomes the darkness of despair.

Holy God, help us to choose to live in hope. Today we make a covenant with you. If you help us to keep the light of hope alive within us, we promise to let that light shine and LIVE in hope, spreading it throughout your world. In the name of the Christ child we pray. Amen.

References: "Sermon Seeds" by Kate Huey; "With Head Held High" by Thomas Currie.