

“A Place for Hope”
Jeremiah 33:14-16
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This is a season of joyful anticipation. For children, part of this relates to the man in the red suit, and their joy can be contagious, even at this point. But children also take in the story of a special birth and begin to appreciate its meaning. And they get excited about the rituals and traditions that make this season special – Hanging of the Greens, Toy Joy, the Christmas Eve Service. There is so much to anticipate!

It is a wonderful season for adults too. We look forward to traditional services, prophecies of a savior’s birth and familiar carols, all pointing to the mystery of incarnation. We anticipate the renewal of old convictions as well as finding some new signs of hope. We may even look forward to spending time with our families...

Perhaps we have a specific concern that is weighing us down or simply an emptiness where once we were full, but as Advent begins, a keen sense of expectancy stirs deep within us. This is a magical time of year, a season when hope can be reborn, a time when miracles happen, even if they are quiet miracles within our hearts.

Yet, somewhere just beneath the surface of our joy something else is lurking – not exactly fear or dread, not precisely the feeling we get when ominous music plays in a film foreshadowing danger, but a question. Will this season bring anything special for us? Will the world change just because Christmas is coming? Will the Christ Child be born not just in Bethlehem but in our hearts? Or are we setting ourselves up for disappointment? Is all the fanfare an exercise in wishful thinking?

In the *Shawshank Redemption* newly imprisoned Andy says, “Hope is a good thing, maybe even the best of things, and good things never die.” But Red, who has spent most of his life in prison, says, “Hope is a dangerous thing, my friend, it can kill a man.”

So, which is it? Who is right? And how should we approach this sacred season of Advent? Is there a place for hope or not?

Perhaps our reading from Jeremiah can help. It may seem odd to look to this prophet for any counsel on hope. He is the man who has the most desolate message to deliver – terror is coming, terror all around! In fact, he repeats this refrain so often that people call him by name mockingly – *magor mis aviv* – Terror All Around!

His message is one of doom and gloom. The people have been unfaithful to God. So, God will no longer protect them. They will fall to the Babylonians. Needless to say, it is not a popular message, but Jeremiah is right, the nation falls. Yet, mixed in with the dominant message of judgment there are signs of hope in the text of Jeremiah, sayings scholars refer to as the Book of Consolation.

We have read a few verses from this book today. After predicting the judgment that is sure to come, Jeremiah says the days are coming when the Lord will fulfill the promise made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. A righteous branch will spring up for David, a leader who will abide in God's will, unlike the current leader, King Zedekiah, whose name means "my righteousness is Yahweh" but whose ways are anything but righteous. Justice and righteousness will return to the land, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.

It is a word of future hope, the promise of good things sure to come after all the struggles, not unlike the hope expressed in the reading from Luke of a day when Jesus will return. It is a wonderful word, a word desperately needed by people in despair, yet it comes from such an unlikely source. If Jeremiah can find reason for hope, perhaps there is a place for hope in our lives and world this Advent. And perhaps the nature of Jeremiah's hope can inform ours.

Part of what we see in Jeremiah's hope that is worth claiming is that it is grounded in reality. Jeremiah's entire life is grounded in reality, more reality than he wants. He doesn't want to proclaim the message God gives him. He doesn't want his nation to fall. But this is God's word and so this is what he proclaims. His message of hope for a better future is framed by the present reality of despair.

Furthermore, not only do the prophet's words of hope come in a time of despair for the nation, Jeremiah speaks these words from a kind

of prison. He has been confined to the court of the guard because the king does not like his message. Jeremiah has failed the patriotism test of his day. He has spoken ill of the current leader and the status of the nation. So, he has been detained. He has no illusions about his own future even as he predicts the nation's fate. He expects no divine intervention. Yet, while the nation falls and he sits in prison, the prophet expresses hope for the future, deep and profound hope.

That's the kind of hope we need, one that is in touch with reality yet still sees beyond despair. We don't benefit from false hope - pretending that our diagnosis isn't accurate or assuming that we will be miraculously healed, pretending that our nation's struggles with race are a thing of past and that everyone is ready to hold hands and sing Kumbaya, pretending that increasing economic disparities will just sort themselves out peacefully and that whatever is going on with climate change doesn't really matter. Any hope that can help us must be in touch with reality, no matter how difficult it is to face. Yet any hope that is genuine will see beyond our current reality to something better.

I read an article on hope this week on the EthicsDaily website, written by Guy Sayles, the former pastor of First Baptist Church, Asheville, who preached here several years ago near the time of his retirement. As I was reading along, I thought – this is a thoughtful article, informed by much experience, focusing upon the goodness of God whether we experience specific, hoped-for outcomes or not. It just seemed like a nice academic, yet also warm and pastoral reflection.

But then, near the end of the article, Guy discloses one personal detail that gives the article more weight. After two years of being in remission, his cancer has returned. During Thanksgiving week, he spent two days at the infusion center, receiving chemotherapy, feeling anxious yet believing that “God fills the eerie silence of hopelessness with the music of angels and tells the terrified there is no reason to fear.”

He goes on to say this. “As I rolled up my shirt sleeve for the nurse to insert the I.V. needle into my arm, I leaned into the promise of hope expressed in the words Julian of Norwich heard Jesus say to her in an experience of severe illness: ‘I may make all things well, and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and I will make all

things well; and you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well.” Guy closes the article with these words, “The chemo might not work, and I may not be cured; but God is at work, and I will be healed. Living or dying, all shall be well, because nothing is impossible with God.” That is a hope grounded in reality, the kind of hope we need.

Another thing we see in Jeremiah’s hope that is reflected very clearly in Guy Sayles’ article is that it is rooted in the goodness of God, not any specific outcome or experience, which means its specific embodiment is up to God, not us. Jeremiah would like the nation to repent and thus restore its relationship to God immediately and avoid being conquered by the Babylonians. At the very least, he would like to live to the new day of hope and rebirth for the nation.

Neither of these outcomes is possible and thus, if Jeremiah’s hope depends on them, it is a false and futile hope. But it does not. It depends on the goodness of God to achieve whatever outcome God desires. It will happen in God’s timing but it will be worth the wait. A day does come when justice and righteousness are experienced. A righteous branch springs up for David. From ancient days, Jewish people see these things happening in the return from exile. Christians view Jesus’ birth as the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy. From either perspective, the hope Jeremiah expresses turns out to be genuine.

Jeremiah doesn’t experience the fulfillment of his hope, but he believes it is genuine. We know this because in the previous chapter he buys land from his cousin Hanamel, a field at Anathoth (32:9f). At a time when the value of any property is nil, given that a foreign power is seizing everything, Jeremiah spends good money acquiring land he knows he will never live on but trusts his descendants will. It is either the most foolish investment in history or a profound expression of faith. He trusts God’s promise that one day his people will build houses and plant vineyards in the land again. And, of course, as we know, they do.

It’s a bit like the parents of friends of mine in Louisville who bought land in California just east of a major fault line. They trust that one day they will own ocean-front property, when the big earthquake comes. They may not to see it, but the day will come, they believe. In a

much more positive way, Jeremiah believes God's promise that one day the people will be able to return to their homeland.

That's where hope lies for us, in our trust in the goodness of God, our belief that God makes good on promises, not necessarily on our schedule or in our way, but in God's time and in a way worth the wait. This is why Guy Sayles says – living or dying, all shall be well.

So, if we are struggling with a major health issue or weighed down by grief that just won't go away, if we are consumed by a relationship challenge or anxious about some work reality, if we are drifting in our faith and feeling nothing as this holy season begins, we have reason for hope; not because we are guaranteed healing and reconciliation, purpose and peace; but because God will give us more than we can hope for in God's own good time and way. Living or dying, all shall be well.

And if we are concerned about the world around us - the rampant injustice, the hateful bigotry, the nasty divisiveness, the utter disregard for truth, the violence we do to each other with our words and our fists and our guns - we have reason for hope; not because what we want and think is right will happen exactly when and how we want it to (thank God, since none of us knows for sure what is right!); but because God is good and thus justice and righteousness will one day reign in the land. So, there is cause for hope, no matter how desolate our situation is, and since there is, we have reason to continue working for good.

In *Letters and Papers from Prison* Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this. "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; (but) only then and no earlier will we readily lay down our work for a better future." That's the kind of hope we claim.

The only question that remains is as to how we claim this hope that is ours. Jeremiah heard God's voice in some way. He didn't just dream up his vision of the future. The word of the Lord came to him and

through him and the work of scribes who preserved his work, to us. So, a part of how we hear a word of hope is through scripture, the record of how people have heard from God in the past, and through other traditions that have spoken to the faithful before, services like Hanging of the Greens, ministries like Toy Joy. But whether God speaks a word of hope to us through these experiences or some other way, we have to hear it. How do we hear, especially when we are filled with despair?

In a sermon on hope, Riverside Church pastor Amy Butler related a story from Radiolab. Two twenty-one-year-old art students were living their dream in Brooklyn, pursuing their vocations and basking in the glow of love until Emelie was hit by a truck while riding her bicycle and ended up in an ICU. For weeks Alan and Emilie's parents waited for any sign of hope, but it seemed she was not going to wake up. So, her parents were ready to move her to a nursing home.

But Alan refused to give up. He said, "She's in there; she just can't get out. You have to give her a chance!" Realizing Emilie had some hearing loss since childhood and wore hearing aids before the accident, and knowing the doctors thought she might have suffered some loss of vision in the accident, he tried something desperate. He wrote the words, "I love you," on her arm, and immediately she woke up.

Alan was convinced, but Emilie's parents were not. So, he put in her hearing aids and turned them on and everything changed suddenly. "Just by hearing his voice..." she said, "I came back."

Words of hope come to us in different ways, but we have to hear them. Sometimes we need aids along the way, often we need other people to believe in us and encourage us, but words of hope will come.

The *Shawshank Redemption* ends with Red getting out of prison and going to meet his friend Andy in Mexico. As he travels on a bus and walks along the beach toward Andy, he is heard to say, "I hope I can make it across the border, I hope to see my friend and shake his hand, I hope the Pacific is as beautiful as it has been in my dreams, I hope..." All of this from a man who said hope is a dangerous thing, it can kill a man. It can also keep a man or woman alive if it is grounded in reality and rooted in the goodness of God.