

A Righteous Branch

Jeremiah 33: 6-18

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Each year, as we start the season of Advent, the journey is familiar, but the world is different and our lives are different. We prepare for God to give birth to something new in the reality of this time.

Today we hear from Jeremiah, and Jeremiah was prophesying during some of the most difficult times of Judah's history. To clarify, in this time, Judah is the southern kingdom of what we think of as ancient Israel, and it includes Jerusalem, the center.

Judah, and ancient Israel as a whole, were on the trade route between two rival empires. Egypt was to the south west and Babylon/Assyria (what is modern day Iraq) was to the north and east. Israel and Judah were in constant danger of being conquered and destroyed. It was bad luck.

For Jeremiah, the problem is that the kings of Judah have engaged in centuries of idolatry and oppressive practices. The oppressive practices included concentrating wealth in their hands, building big palaces for themselves, building up the military (trying to keep up with the other empires in the neighborhood). Meanwhile the people were suffering.

For the prophets, idolatry nurtured these oppressive practices. The kings will start backsliding into the ways of empire. After delivery from slavery in Egypt, the purpose of the Ten

Commandments and the laws that follow are to keep the people from becoming another empire. They are to be a people with a different way of life. This way of life involves right relationship with God, which leads to right relationship with the neighbor and with the land too.

The kings have lost their way, and Jeremiah just happens to mention this to King Zedekiah. And he says that God's judgment is coming in the form of the Babylonian army.

The prophets are truth tellers and hope tellers. The truth the prophets tell the kings is that injustice has consequences. God, the love that is at the heart of everything, won't stand for injustice forever. I may not always agree with what actions the prophets say are God's judgment, but I agree with this notion that injustice has consequences and Love won't stand for it forever.

King Zedekiah hears Jeremiah's word of the Lord. The king, though, knows the identity of this ancient whistleblower, so he throws him in jail. Babylon's army arrives and conquers Jerusalem. The king, the king's court, the elite, are taken back to Babylon in exile. It's brutal. Meanwhile, the citizens of Jerusalem are trapped in a destroyed city. They are running out of water and food, and sickness and disease is spreading. It's a horrible situation.

In the midst of this, Jeremiah becomes a hopeteller. We see his imagination. He's able to imagine, even in the midst of destruction, what restoration and healing looks like. He is able to imagine and articulate God's mercy, forgiveness, and the power of God's love to do something new and change things.

Jeremiah proclaims, “there will be joy again.” In a time when people can’t imagine a future being any different because in crisis you look right in front of you, Jeremiah assures them, “there will be weddings. There will be new families welcoming in the next generation. In this time of the destruction of war and a lack of food, the land and pastures will be restored, the people’s relationship to the land will be restored, and there will be food for life.

Then there’s this next section, the most radical of all.

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the House of Judah. In those days and at that time, I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David and he will execute righteousness and justice 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.” David shall never lack someone to sit on the throne and the priests shall never lack someone to lead the rituals that nurture this faithfulness to God.

Scholar Patrick Miller says this about these verses, “the restoration of fortunes (for Judah and Jerusalem) is not simply a matter of abundance, productivity, and partying. It also includes the re-establishment of systems of governance and (religious practice), creating leaders who will rightly render the affairs of the people and will lead them in their worship of the Lord.”

This year we hear that within the realm of God’s concern is the re-establishment of systems of governance and leaders who will rightly render the affairs of the people. The people of Jeremiah’s time heard this hope in the midst of the destruction of war. We hear these words in the midst of a time of impeachment, chaos and division.

The early church linked Jesus to these hopes, proclaiming that Jesus is this hoped for son of David, the Messiah. Jesus is this righteous branch that has sprung up for David.

Jesus doesn't become an earthly king. The church has placed the authority of the Christ beyond time itself. But the life and ministry of Jesus has everything to do with the what the prophets are talking about. Jesus shows what the law, love of God and neighbor, look like. Just as the law showed an alternative to the Egyptian empire, Jesus embodies the kingdom of God, an alternative to the oppression of the Roman empire. Jesus is crucified on a Roman cross, and is resurrected to become the church. We all become Christ's body in the world, for this time.

Where is God giving birth to something new?

On Sunday afternoon, the 17th, I went to the Northfield ISAI AH faith summit. ISAI AH is a coalition of faith communities, Christian and Muslim, working together for racial and economic equity. First UCC is a member and a leader. You could say it is an effort to influence leaders so that they will "re-establish systems of governance and rightly render the affairs of the people. It is an effort to embody the love of God and neighbor and together in ways that lead to abundant life for everyone.

We were in a big basement room at St. Dominics and the room was full. There were about 70 people packed in. Plenty of people from First UCC, and others from Northfield that I didn't know. In Rochester last week, there were 150 people gathered for a similar meeting. There are

meetings like this happening in Willmar, in the Twin Cities, in Mosques all across the state.

People of faith are gathering.

We were asked to reflect on the things that keep us up at night. Those gathered wrote on big pieces of newsprint: Climate, health care, mental health, youth homelessness, gun violence, racism, the cost of college, child care. One person wrote, “the fading of truth.”

We were asked to imagine the beloved community. We were asked to engage in the sort of imagination that Jeremiah was engaging in as he imagined weddings and new generations and pastures dotted with sheep.

I wrote communion table values. The beloved community is where everyone is welcome, everyone is valued, and everyone has enough. I walked around to look at what everyone else was writing and returned to what I had written a few minutes later. Someone had added, “and there is kindness for all.” It was a good addition.

All 70 people in that room were asked to invite friends and neighbors over for a house meeting to ask the same kinds of questions: What is breaking your heart right now? What is keeping you up at night? What do we need and how do we get there? If you are invited to one of these house meetings, I encourage you to say “yes.” Then everyone at those meetings will be asked to go to caucuses in 2020 to stand up for those values and to volunteer to go on to the next round of caucuses. All 150 people in Rochester were asked to do the same. Along with those who gathered in Willmar, in the Twin Cities, in mosques all across the state. The goal is to have

5000 people of faith intentionally caucusing on our faith values along with 10,000 others across the state intentionally caucusing on climate.

This isn't new. We did the same thing in 2018, but there will be more of us this time, and our impact will be deeper and greater. Christians and Muslims and the Climate Concerned will be standing together insisting that we can create a politics in our state that reflects the best of who we are and responds to our urgent needs right now.

At the gathering in St. Dominic's basement, one of the Quakers in our group led us in a faith reflection. She told us that "every community needs a group of angelic troublemakers." I thought, "well, here we are."

Is this the new thing that God is giving birth to right now? Calling forth a band of angelic troublemakers for a time of need?

As Madeline L'Engel reminded us this morning,

(The Christ) did not wait till the world was ready,

Till men and nations were at peace,

He came when the Heavens were unsteady,

And the prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.

He came when the need was deep and great...

To a world like ours, of anguished shame

He came, and his Light would not go out.

We place our hope in God giving birth to something new in our lives, in our communities, in our world. A child will be born who will lead the way. And we will do our best to follow. Amen.