

Texts: Jeremiah 33:13-17

Subject: The Promise of a Messiah

Theme: Good Things to Come

1st Sunday of Advent; Dec. 1, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,
Amen.

What does *hope* look like?

We like hope, we want hope - we don't want to lose it.

We hope things will go according to plan, that events will match expectations, that we will achieve a desired outcome. When these things fail to occur, we say *our hopes are dashed*. After a setback, if we have hope, we can seek another opportunity to make good things happen. We hope for a lot of things, don't we? We might hope for nice weather, a quiet afternoon, smooth transitions, a team victory, and often in our lives we find ourselves hoping for good news. We hope for things many of us have a hard time defining: peace, justice, righteousness.

Often our hope is in our children. My hope for my children is that they will be able to follow their own curiosity, to imagine a way to serve and grow and provide for themselves and their families, to make a positive difference in the world, and to love and be loved. What more could I hope for? Their mother and I do what we can to set them up for success, that they would be able to have hope for their own futures.

The Apostle Paul writes that we hope for what we cannot see (Rom. 8.25). We hope for what has not yet happened. We have hopes for our the world, for our nation, for our neighborhoods. Without hope, nothing gets done. We might hope for our days to be easy, uneventful, fruitful, or safe.

The people of Judah were facing the opposite - things were bad all around. After the Assyrians fell, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, taking people away from their homes, into exile - and there was little hope to go around. Jeremiah, a prophet born in the time of King Josiah's rule, mostly spoke out against the powerful, the people who had done wrong, gone after their own selfish desires, and worshipped other gods. But in a few places, Jeremiah offers comfort in these difficult times. He speaks a word of hope to sustain people, to direct their attention back to God, the one who is powerful and able to do a new thing - he brings a word of comfort and promises there will be *good things to come*.

The people couldn't see it - how could they have believed it?

If they looked around, they could only see injustice, the conquerors had destroyed the temple, the people had gone after 'worthless things and became worthless themselves' (Jer. 2:5). The land had been defiled - polluted - the language of the land's unrighteousness is throughout the book of Jeremiah. The land *itself* had become a ruin. How could it be restored? If the promise relied on the people to make it come true, it would never get done. The faithful in Israel just needed the right leader - they were waiting for a new king to set right what another king had done wrong. Josiah was a relatively good king, but he died. And the Babylonians came anyway. Things just seemed to get worse.

Their hope was lost. *But nothing is lost in the eyes of God.*

Hope looks like a prophet - speaking against the powerful, speaking in the wilderness, speaking promises of the light of the world, of a new thing. God sends us prophets too - ones who speak up for the land, for the people, for faith, and call us to be

who we were created to be. Prophets still speak God's word of judgement, call us to turn from idols of racism, power, and privilege. They stand for equality, for families, and for economic justice. Some of the prophets in my life are pastors. Some are teachers, some are members of this church, some live outdoors. They are ones who still have hope that we can be who we were created to be. A prophet often speaks up, knowing they will be unpopular, that they will not be heard, that they might be injured, arrested, reviled, or worse.

A few weeks ago, I followed online as hundreds spoke out against a proposed city statute that could have anyone sleeping or camping outdoors arrested if they choose *not* to go to a local homeless shelter. Many cited the reality that local shelters are inadequate for families with children, for women who have been abused, for people with pets or belongings that could be easily stolen. With a prophetic voice, they spoke out against criminalizing homelessness, about the lack of political will to build affordable and transitional housing in our city. They spoke out against city leaders, who understandably just want to 'do something' but hadn't considered the language of the proposed bill or real-life outcomes cited by social service workers who have been trying to tackle this problem and have assisted people experiencing homelessness for years. The measure passed 5-2, and signage, having been prepared in advance, went up the next day. The rule officially goes into effect in February.

Things look bleak, but we hope for *good things to come*.

For many who have had to struggle, who have lost everything, who have faced down illness, addiction, abuse and more, hope is all they have. Their hope is in the next open door, the food pantry, the health clinic, the charitable stranger. For some, their

hope is God who promises to provide and often does through the hands and feet of the people in our community.

God send prophets to speak a word of judgement, to show us where we've fallen short, and to speak words of hope and promise - of good things to come. Jeremiah spoke comfort from a prison cell - he was locked up for speaking out against the rulers of his day. The people of Judah couldn't see a future, couldn't know what would come next, but needed to know God was near.

Through this prophet, God promises that a branch - like a shoot - would grow up from what was just a cut down tree, a stump of Jesse - David's family would rule from the throne forever. When the people were at their lowest point, when they had nothing else to hope for, would they be able to hear the promise that God would still come through? When we look around and see injustice, inequality, the land itself ruined, families torn apart, violence, hate crimes, and more, will we be able to hear the promise again? Will we have hope in this season?

Israel's hope - and ours - is in the promise itself - God's good word. The promise is for the future restoration, for redemption and healing for God's chosen people. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when *I will fulfill the promise*" God speaks through the prophet, giving comfort, but also declaring power to bring about real righteousness, real justice in the earth.

I want to be a part of that future. I want to be a part of the hope of the world. I'm no prophet. Certainly no savior. I'm just trying to tell God's story. I want to point to signs of hope in the world - it might be neighbors who want to create a better system for those who lose their homes, organizations fighting for better working conditions for

immigrants, day laborers, and their families, churches working together to serve the poor and hungry among us, places and people who welcome those who are marginalized - there are signs everywhere. God is bringing restoration for the world. God is making us new every day. In Jesus, God has given us eternal and lasting hope.

Jeremiah says that in those days, Judah will be saved - all God's people - and the city of Jerusalem will be called "the Lord is our righteousness."¹ Then, the prophet says, there will be justice in the land - in the earth itself perhaps - and the people will be who they were created to be - caring for the least among them, devoted in worship, and serving one another. The days are surely coming.

Today we hang the greens - holly and ivy, an advent wreath, candles, a tree, a star, the manger - they are signs of hope. These ordinary things, speak to us of the power and provision of God. They point to the infinite - the divine love of God in Christ Jesus for the whole world. They point to the promise of a savior, and in this time of preparation, remind us that we are not out on a limb by ourselves, but celebrating this season, anticipating *good things to come*. Our hope is not limited to what we can see. Our hope is in the Lord. Our hope is always coming to us in Jesus, our true ruler and heavenly King. We can have confidence and hope that this good word - the living word - is ours, and is true righteousness, justice, and peace.

Amen.

¹ note that in 23:6 it is the king that shall be known as "the Lord is our righteousness"