

December 2, 2018

TEXT: Jeremiah 33:14-16

TITLE: In Days to Come

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

Twenty-two shopping days left until Christmas, just in case you're counting. I'm not. Despite all the retailers that rushed ahead and put up Christmas displays alongside Halloween candy and costumes, the early start of the Christmas movies on the Hallmark channel, and Christmas music playing continually on the radio 24/7. I'm not feeling the joy of Christmas. There are many other things weighing on me, and I suspect many of you as well. We are still reeling from the hate-filled, irrational, murderous act that took the lives of 11 of our Abrahamic siblings at the Tree of Life synagogue; the decreasing life expectancy rate in the US as a result of the increase in deaths due to drug overdoses and suicide; violence in our city streets and in war zones throughout the world; divisive rhetoric that instills fear of people considered different. Weariness and despair can easily set in.

In today's lectionary reading, Israel was in turmoil and Jeremiah was in prison. Their city lay in waste, burned out, and bodies were littering the street. For years, Jeremiah warned the people of God that their sin and faithlessness would result in destruction, and these things had come to fruition. Death, terror, deprivation and sorrow are everywhere, and the people are soon to be exiled to Babylon. This passage isn't a feel good, hope, peace and joy word that we would anticipate during the liturgical season of Advent and yet it speaks to the world we are living in today.

Luke 21 speaks of the many signs that shall come upon the earth in the end times. I'm not prophesying that the end times are upon us. However, recently cities have been burned out, destroyed by floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis; there are genocide emergencies in the Middle East and many African countries; bodies are lying in the streets and in synagogues and grocery stores and in homes. The economy is getting better, but not everyone is benefiting. People are still homeless, financially insecure; joblessness still exists for some and we learned just this week that GM plans to close plants and lay off workers. Our nation is experiencing tragedies like never before.

What Israel needed and every nation needs is to be safe, secure, and prosperous and leadership that does what is right and just. Leaders like former President George H.W. Bush, who despite his perceived flaws and weaknesses while in office was truly a servant leader, a person of humility, who respected others, even his detractors. President Bush was a man who genuinely tried to do what was best for our country. He was a man that other presidents have looked to for guidance and advice—a man who wasn't afraid to admit his flaws and shortcomings. Isn't ironic that we often only realize these attributes in others until they have died?

The word of the Lord came again to Jeremiah in the midst of what are some of the darkest days for him and for Israel:

“Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known. I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them; they shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.” (Jeremiah 33:3-9)

In the midst of what appears to hopeless and desolate God promises: “I will reestablish my covenant. In days to come, I will make a righteous branch sprout from David’s line.” These words remind us of the promise God made to David in 2 Samuel 7 and reiterated in David’s last words in 2 Samuel 23. “You will always have a son on the throne of Israel. David’s line will not die out.” God’s promises are yes and amen, and God is the only one whose love and mercy and grace are evident even in the most desperate times. God promises a future of healing, security, prosperity and joy, beyond our current situation. And even more is promised in days to come—forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation.

With the world as he knows it crumbling, Jeremiah implores God’s people to see and receive God’s future of hope, and prosperity. As God promises, I will establish a righteous branch to spring up from David, a sprout, a shoot from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1). And this branch will do what failed kings, presidents, and leaders could not nor cannot do. This branch will act righteously and defend justice, especially those who are victims of injustice and unrighteousness and in those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.

As we enter into the liturgical season of Advent may we realize that the promises of God have been, are and will be fulfilled. In the fullness of God’s time, the greater Son of David, Jesus the appointed and anointed one, will accomplish exceedingly more than Jeremiah or any of us could ever imagine. And God’s promise of security and righteousness, justice, peace and restoration is for not only for Israel but it is for us as well.

Beloved, may we long for the assurance that in days to come the lion will lay down with the lamb. In days to come may we long for violence, unrest, abuse and wars to end, and for God to heal our hearts and our lands, and may justice roll like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream. In days to come, may the attributes and descriptors used to divide and denigrate us, be cherished and recognized as part of God’s creative plan for diversity and difference. In days to come may the financially insufficient not be treated as burdens on society, but siblings with whom we walk side by side. In days to come, may everyone, created in God’s image be welcomed and loved and honored and cherished.

Jeremiah's words for us are appropriate as we gather at table this first Advent Sunday. As the most poignant meaning of in days to come is found at table; a table that is not cloaked in the secular joys and cheer of Christmas, but set with food that was paid with a price, table where we meet one another by him who has come, is coming and will come again. In the words of the hymnist: O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind; bid envy, strife and discord cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace. In days to come we shall rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come."

Amen.