

Waiting on God

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Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10

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What do you expect to find when you pick up your Bible? Do you see the Bible and its stories as a window or a mirror? Do you expect to gaze through the words and images of the Bible into a bygone era where you can observe people and experiences far removed from the world you know? Is the Bible primarily a means of looking back at the way things were—a window to the past? Or do you find in the Bible a mirror of yourself and the world in which we live? Making allowances for differences in culture and respective world views between the biblical world and now, do you encounter struggles and challenges in the Bible's narratives and teachings similar to the struggles and challenges you experience today?

This morning marks the beginning of our Advent journey, the beginning of our trek toward Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus. We gather again around the Advent Wreath to mark our weeks of preparation, and we sing again the words of the ancient Advent hymn, "O come, O come, Emmanuel." As we do so, we recognize that we are doing something more than just looking back in time. We are singing about something more than just the suffering of captive Israel. We are reflecting on our experience and the universal experience of humankind. Far from expressing judgment on the faith of ancient Israel, the words become a mirror, representing the unfinished and incomplete journey of every generation—a truth attested by the ancient nature and continued use of the hymn through the ages. Although their exact origin is not known, the Great O's, as they are called, of the hymn date back some fifteen centuries. One of the church fathers made reference to them in the late 5th or early 6th century, and they were sung in Rome and the monasteries in the 7th and 8th centuries. Each of the traditional seven verses begins with a title for the Christ taken from the book of Isaiah; and each of them expresses the struggle of human history and the longing for salvation, light, healing, deliverance and freedom. Each of them, however, is also about hope. The seven titles of the Christ are so arranged that if we begin with the last and take the first letter of each, we have the Latin words *ero cras* and the joyful promise, "Tomorrow, I will come."

Advent, waiting on the coming of the Christ, is about hope; but it is also about reality. Far from indulging in visions of sugar plums, Advent is about looking into our deepest selves, our deepest hopes and dreams and fears. It is about recognizing that we wait, we always wait upon the God of promise. It is about recognizing our unfinished selves and our unfinished, suffering world. It is about waiting and hoping and working toward the hope that draws us forward still.

Advent comes in the midst of darkness. Fittingly, Advent comes for us just when we begin our turn from the time of year when the nights are the longest into the season when nighttime becomes progressively shorter. The hope and light of Advent comes, in other words, in the midst of darkness and in anticipation of the lifting of darkness. When it arrives, Advent may seem like nothing more than "a pinhole of light surrounded by darkness" [E. Webb, 2012 WorkingPreacher.com]. The world, with its suffering, its violence, its ruthlessness are all too much with us; and the light that is coming into the world seems so small, so fragile, so removed from the way things are that, despite the assurances of John, we wonder if it can withstand the darkness. We fear, if we are honest, that it just may not be enough. We fear it may not reach the darkest places of our world, the deepest anxieties of our lives, the enmity and division that are so rife around us.

On this first Sunday of Advent, on this day when our thoughts focus upon the hope of Christ's coming, look with me, then, into a mirror. Look with me at the preaching and experience of the prophet Jeremiah, the prophet fondly, or not so fondly, referred to as the weeping prophet. Six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, he lived in the midst of the ravaging of Judah by the Babylonian empire. With a ministry ranging over more than forty years, his message became increasingly alarmist. He was deeply critical of the morality of his peers, the thinking of the intelligentsia, the domestic and foreign policies of his government, and the leadership of the Temple. His caustic message cost him the support of family and friends; the general public labeled him a kook; and the palace authorities, a traitor. His efforts saw him eventually held in confinement in the palace courtyard as Jerusalem crumbled. As the walls came down around him, he remained in the city, preaching his unpopular message.

Some fifty-two chapters of Jeremiah's book, not to mention the book of Lamentations ascribed to him, are words of dire warning and lamentation. The prophet weeps, yes; but he also depicts a God of deep sorrow—so much so that it is often difficult to determine where Jeremiah's grief leaves off and God's begins. And yet in the midst of the book, in chapters 30 through 33, we have his little Book of Consolation from which we read as we entered our service this morning. David Steele observes, tongue-in-cheek, that with Jeremiah "there's a lot more afflicting than comforting going on" [*Theology Today*, 1986]. And to be honest, if we were living in the middle of the ruins of our nation's capital and if all of our nation's places of worship, work places, and homes lay in ruin, we, too, would be a little less than optimistic.

The picture Jeremiah paints in the midst of devastation is faithful to the darkness around him; and yet in that darkness, he sees a glimmer of light. Just when everything is crashing around him, just when things are their darkest, the word of Yahweh, the word of God, touches him with hope:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land (33:14-16).

Jeremiah envisions the return of hope—a return to pride as a nation rather than humiliation, a return of a thriving economy and a widespread sense of security and well-being, and undergirding it all, a deep commitment to the justice and righteousness of God.

We live in the hope of a God of promise. Be sure that the hope that Jeremiah holds out to his contemporaries is something more than a not-to-worry, be-happy version of the power of positive thinking. His words of consolation fall *in the midst* of a time of great suffering, not on the other side of it. The story on the other side of the Book of Consolation unfolds in cataclysmic destruction. Jeremiah himself eventually has to flee to Egypt where he suffers ongoing derision and eventually dies. But in the midst of it all, do not miss his bold action in the name of hope. At God's urging, he purchases a field and this within the context of the sword, famine, and pestilence that will define not just his own lifetime, but the lifetime of a full generation to follow. More than short term economic reasoning, Jeremiah grounds his purchase in the promise of God:

I will bring them back to this place, and I will settle them in safety. They shall be my people, and I will be their God. . . . I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them. . . . and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul" (32:37, 38, 40).

Insisting on a written deed attesting to the sale, Jeremiah takes it and places it in an earthen jar where it can be preserved until the day when his people return to the land. "Apparently," Joanna Adams suggests, reflecting on Jeremiah's action, as far as Jeremiah was concerned, "with God a promise made is a promise kept" [*Christian Century*, 2006]. Despite the empty wasteland that surrounded him on all sides, Jeremiah acted in full confidence that the outcome of human history was in the hands of a God, who could be trusted.

And so must we. Looking back upon that distant people "run over by ancient history," to use Leonard Beechy's words, we see something of a reflection of our own time in a mirror. In view of the places in our personal lives and in the lives of the peoples who fill our world today, we recognize that devastation and exile reside not only in the past, but in the present. "After a long and terrible night," Jeremiah assured his people, "a brilliant morning would dawn and a generation of God's people would wake up in safety in a place renamed "justice." And so it is with us.

"The church exists to remind us that we live in the time between the times, between what is dying and what is being born, between the "already" of Christ's reign and the "not yet" of Advent. The church year draws us into a drama, but the pull of its narrative is not away from our lives but more deeply into them" [Beechy, *Christian Century*, 2009].

Advent, you see, is about waiting on the coming of the Christ, is about hope; but it is also about reality. It is not about visions of sugar plums. It is about looking into our deepest selves, our deepest hopes and dreams and fears. It is about recognizing that we wait, we *always* wait upon the God of promise. It is about recognizing our unfinished selves and our unfinished, suffering world. It is about waiting and hoping and working in faithfulness to the God who gives us a future of hope.