

Advent Hope

Jesus is the fulfilment of all of God’s gracious promises.

.....Jeremiah 33: 14 – 16.....

“ ‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: ‘The LORD Our Righteousness.’”

The first Advent candle which we lit today stands for ‘HOPE.’ ‘Advent Hope’ is different from the kind of hope we usually mean. When we say we ‘hope’ something turns out well, it is usually a ‘cross-your-fingers’ kind of hope. ‘Advent Hope’ is much more than wishful wanting, it is a kind of hope that *knows for certain* that God will do what He said He would.

Today, I think we all ‘hope’ God will bring our lives back to ‘normal,’ and soon! Whether as a result of our contracting the COVID virus, or from just trying to cope in these times of continual change, I think we all feel disoriented, like our lives are ‘foggy’.

We have suffered loss on so many different levels. Some of us have lost loved ones from the COVID virus. For others, recovery is taking a lot longer than we want. Some of us have been prevented from spending precious time with loved ones during the COVID quarantines. Many have suffered job loss and irreparable personal loss as we have spent almost two years living with all the unwanted upheaval it has created. Lord God, we do need your ‘hope’!

One thing we are able to see throughout the Bible is that God does have a plan, even when it doesn’t at first seem like it. The Bible also shows us that God always keeps His promises.

Even when God’s people experienced the most devastating circumstances, God came through. Granted, God didn’t work as quickly or in the way some hoped, but God always provided for His people while He worked out His plan.

When Israel wandered for forty years in the wilderness, God taught them to rely on Him. When there seemed to be no way to escape Pharoah and his armies, God caused the Red Sea to part. When there was no food or water, God fed the people with manna from heaven and made water flow from a rock.

Over and over, we have learned through Israel’s history, that God does always provide what is needed. God’s timing always has a purpose, even though it is usually hidden from us at the moment.

God’s history is linear. It is not circular. God’s plan has a beginning and an end. With God, there is no continual ‘circle of life’. God’s plan for history is headed in a straight line toward the Day when God will finally and completely fulfill His gracious promise.

What was the promise that God spoke about through Jeremiah? What was the ‘gracious promise’ Israel was waiting for God to fulfill?

When Jeremiah wrote this passage we just read, Jerusalem was in trouble. The Babylonians had surrounded their city; it was shut off. No people, no food or supplies could go in or out.

For almost 20 years King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had been stalking the city of Jerusalem. And now, despite Jeremiah’s pleas for the nation to repent and turn to God, Jerusalem was about to fall to King Nebuchadnezzar and its people would be taken captive and dispersed far and wide.

If anyone should have felt hopeless, it was Jeremiah and all of the people of Judah in the city of Jerusalem.

Against all the signs to the contrary, God promised to restore His people through a king from David’s lineage. God promised to send a *‘Righteous Branch’* who would be a descendant of King David.

Neither Jeremiah, at age 70 when he fled to Egypt, nor any of his contemporaries lived to see the restoration of Israel’s rule in Jerusalem. From the exile on, there was a whole long string of nations which ruled Judah, even after the Persians allowed the Jews in exile to return to rebuild their Temple.

The Persians were defeated by the Greeks under Alexander the Great. Then the Greeks were defeated by the Ptolemies in Egypt. The Syrians took control from the Ptolemies and then the Syrians were overrun by the Romans.

Through all of the political turmoil and persecution, the nation of Israel continued to wait and pray and trust that God would fulfill His gracious promise that He made through Jeremiah long ago.

Can you imagine keeping hope alive through all those hundreds and hundreds of years? Can you fathom how the faithful kept from giving in to despair? Don’t you wonder how parents passed down the legacy of hope when God was silent for so long? I can only imagine that it was not by human power, but by divine power that faith in God prevailed.

Centuries later, the *‘hope of Israel,’* finally came. He was heralded only by angels and lowly shepherds. It wasn’t exactly the royal welcome that Israel had expected for their long-awaited Messiah.

Only those with *‘spiritual’* eyes recognized him. Old Simeon at the Temple knew him the instant he saw Mary and Joseph approaching with their eight-day-old son. He took the child Jesus from his parent’s arms, held him in the air and said: ***“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, ... my eyes have seen your salvation, ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”*** (Luke 2:29 – 32)

This advent season, we give thanks to God for sending His Son to be our Savior. We also look forward to the day when Christ will come again and establish God’s new Kingdom reign upon the earth.

The Messiah came to earth as the Incarnation of God in human flesh. Jesus made amends for our sins by his death and then he returned to God in heaven until that day when he will come to earth again.

Two thousand years later, here we are again in the ‘*waiting place.*’ We wait in faith and hope for Jesus to fulfill the promise he made to us when he said that he would one day return to the earth. Hear the Word of the LORD from Luke Chapter 21, beginning at verse 25:

.....**Luke 21: 25 – 36**.....
“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. ²⁶Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁷At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’ ²⁹He told them this parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees. ³⁰When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. ³¹Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. ³⁴Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. ³⁵For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”.....

Many of us have wondered if the COVID virus has been one of those ‘*signs*’ Jesus warned about. Looking back through history, there have been many similar events that cause nations ‘*anguish*’ and ‘*perplexity.*’ Churches were bursting on the Sunday after ‘9-11’, as people wondered if it was a ‘*sign*’ from God. Many, I’m sure, wondered the same thing during the American Civil War, both World Wars, and in Europe during the Bubonic Plague.

While it is fascinating to speculate what the devastating circumstances in our lives mean, ‘**no one knows the hour or the day when Jesus will return.**’ (Matthew 24: 36) Jesus told us that he will return when no one expects him, and that we need to be always ready: spirit, body, mind and soul, to receive him as our King.

What are we supposed to be doing while we wait and hope for Jesus to come again and set up his rule? Jesus said in this passage from Luke that we are to make sure that our hearts are not weighed down by ‘**dissipation,**’ ‘**drunkenness,**’ and ‘**the anxieties of this life.**’ (Luke 21:34)

Truthfully, I had to look up the meaning of ‘**dissipation.**’ It means ‘*carousing and careless use of one’s time.*’ ‘*Dissipation*’ is the opposite of using one’s gifts and time in God’s service. We know that drunkenness steals too much of our lives and needs little further explanation. But the most curious thing that Jesus warns about is worrying.

If we allow ourselves to worry, we are admitting that we don't really trust God. Worry is the opposite of trust, and worry is a *hope-killer*. Worry destroys our faith, causing us to doubt that God is trustworthy and able. But HOPE says, *'no matter what, God will take care of me and I am confident that Jesus will supply all the strength I need.'*

While we wait, we are to grow in faith by building a strong prayer life. Through prayer, we grow in trust and hope in God. We are strengthened; we see God's presence and blessings; we receive God's guidance. Through prayer, God pours out His power upon us through the gift of His Holy Spirit.

Through all of life's trials, Jesus reminds us to have HOPE – A kind of hope like Jeremiah's, a long-standing hope like Judah; to hope even when there seems to be no reasonable hope.

Hope is not mere *'wishful thinking.'* Hope is not based on feelings. Hope in God's promises is not eroded by horrific circumstances. Hope is more like a mountain which cannot be moved. Hope is unyielding, even when waves crash against it. When we are in the pit of seeming hopelessness, Jesus reminds us not to lose hope, but to stand firm in God's promises.

Those who stand firm in Jesus will rejoice when Jesus appears in the clouds in great glory. We who have the *'hope'* of Christ within us will welcome his return. We will not be terrified like those who have been living as if he were a myth.

Right now, the Lord God is patiently waiting for all people to accept His Son's salvation. Those who are living life in a spiritual stupor, *'hung over,'* will be horrified when Jesus does return. They will realize too late that they were not thinking about praising and honoring God with their choices but were living instead for their own glory.

I am so glad that you are here today, hearing this Word from Jesus. Does it make you feel, like I do, that there are so many other people you wish would hear this message?

We know from experience that we can't *'make'* anyone hear what they don't want to hear. But, is there a way to present the *'Good News'* of what Jesus came to share in a way that people *will* listen?

What is the *best* way to tell people that the Savior who loves them is offering salvation right now, and that they need to accept it before the Day he returns in judgment? It is a huge challenge, but I am certain, that with God's guidance, we can find new ways to tell the world, or at least our family, friends and neighbors. I know God will help us find relevant ways to invite others into the Kingdom of God.

Through the power of Christ in us, God will help us proclaim that His HOPE has arrived, and that his name is Jesus. Amen.