

Jeremiah

I've struggled more than I thought I might with what to say this morning. Our readings for Advent this year are readings of hope. We live in a time when hope is so needed. In my devotions yesterday, I reflected a bit on my own experience – am I hopeful? And if so, in the face of everything that's wrong in the world, why? Where does hope even come from?

The pat Christian answer I suppose is Jesus. Pat Christian answers are very helpful to some people. But for those of us who wrestle with faith and what it means for us, they usually fall short.

I think part of why they fall short is because they can be too shallow. For too long, hope in Christ has been reduced to the hope that we'll go to heaven when we die.

That leaves a whole lot of muck to deal with before then. How can we have hope in the present?

The prophet Jeremiah had some things to say about that.

Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah, the high priest during King Josiah's reign. We talked about Josiah and Hilkiah last week.

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah in the 13th year of Josiah's reign.

Jeremiah's life and work began before Babylon's defeat of Judah. It stretched into the time of the exile. His prophecies before Babylon's defeat were typical prophetic words of judgment and warning. But then when Judah was crushed and without hope, those words changed.

Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, had been utterly destroyed by Babylon. Many of the best and brightest had been deported to Babylon. The countryside had been ravaged and crops destroyed.

Since Jerusalem was the economic hub of Judah, the economy was shattered. The people left behind struggled to survive day to day. The king, Josiah's son, was killed. His successor, Zedekiah, was blinded and taken into captivity. His sons were killed. It was the complete end of the line for the monarchy. God's promise that a descendant of David would always rule on the throne seemed shattered.

Most unthinkable of all was that the Temple – the one built by Solomon – had been destroyed. If the Temple could be destroyed, surely that was a sign that Jahweh, their God, had been defeated. How can anyone preach hope in the midst of that?

But that's exactly what God had Jeremiah do. Jeremiah did not get taken into exile. Most of his prophetic words during the exile were in the form of letters to a despairing people.

How could Jeremiah hope at all? There was no visible reason to hope. He only had God's word to go on.

As it turns out that was enough. Even though all appearances might have suggested God had been defeated, Jeremiah knew different.

Jeremiah assured the people that God wasn't done yet. A new branch would grow. A new king would rule on the throne...a king from David's line.

Jeremiah spoke words of assurance to a shattered people. God would restore Judah. The priests and the kings would rule again, but they would be different. Righteous.

The thing is, that didn't happen, at least not in any earthly sense. After the exile, there simply were no more kings of Judah...or Israel. Many of David's descendants that might have been king had been killed. Judah was a vassal nation under one empire after another. Any kings they had were puppet kings.

Although we won't read any of it this year, the Bible stories after the exile mostly reflect confusion, disappointment, and bickering. But a new thread of hope began to arise...focused on this idea of a king sent straight from God...a messiah. A future king who would rule in righteousness.

And that...did happen. It just ended up happening in such an unexpected way people didn't know what to do with it. Sometimes we still don't.

A new king did arise from David's line. Only he didn't descend from an earthly king. Instead, he descended from a carpenter's family line. Joseph was a descendant of David. This new king was born to Mary, a young peasant woman. And of course, he came from God.

God didn't just anoint a new king. In the person of Jesus, God himself came to rule. Hope comes from the utterly unexpected way God works. God continues to rule in the risen Christ and through the Spirit working in the world.

But the unfolding of that reign continues to surprise us – mainly by its lack of grandeur or explosiveness.

The prophets are not just to be read as history. They are to be read as a word from God to us in the present.

So we, like Jeremiah, are left to hope in something that isn't always super obvious. The reign of Christ.

The task of the prophets was always first to tell the truth about Israel's situation. They were called to speak God's word of judgment on a nation that didn't want to hear it.

Advent, with its emphasis on the prophetic, is a time of similar honesty about our own world.

The other day, I saw the United States life expectancy statistics for 2022. Life expectancy dipped down significantly during the pandemic, fueled by over a million premature deaths from Covid. Since Covid's deadliness has diminished, life expectancy ticked up a bit in 2022, but it's still considerably lower than it was.

The reason? The high number of premature deaths from suicide and drug overdoses. Suicide is the second most common cause of death in young adults 25 to 34.

Recent statistics show that the incidence of anxiety or depression in adults 18- 24 is nearly 50% and in those aged 25 – 49 is nearly 40%.

Young adults are delaying having children or even deciding not to because of fears about climate change and anxiety about the ability to support children.

People are lonely and the displays of meanness on social media and in real life can be staggering.

What all these things seem to share in common is a lack of hope. Where do we find hope in the midst of all that's going on?

Like ancient Israel, we are often tempted to put too much faith in earthly rulers to solve our problems. And to be sure, asking our leaders to address issues is part of our call as citizens and Christians.

But the hope that comes from a newly elected leader is usually fleeting. At best, the reality of a new leader never quite lives up to our expectations. At worst, our leaders turn out to be about as bad as the kings of Israel.

Placing our hope instead in the reign of Christ will look different. The reign of Christ doesn't look bombastic or glamorous or even very powerful. Instead, it often looks small and insignificant – like a small green shoot growing out of an apparently dead tree stump. It looks like a tiny baby, born to a couple who are small town nobodies... a baby who turns out to be God.

It looks like small acts of love...small acts of resilience... It looks like planting gardens and creating things whose impact will carry into the future. It looks like having children. It looks like feeding and caring for those children and educating them.

It looks like a kind word to someone who is clearly having a bad day. It looks like paying attention when young people share their angst about the future. It looks like getting to know your neighbors and creating community in surprising places. It looks like taking time to listen when someone is hurting.

I wish we lived in a world where we could easily and more directly share the hope we have found in Christ. And when the time and circumstances are right, we should.

But hope itself can be contagious and maybe our main call as followers of Jesus right now is to practice hope in all the small and large ways we can.

So, in answer to my first question – yes, I am hopeful. I am hopeful because I trust that underneath the despair and ruin that is so visible, the reign of Christ keeps breaking through in the small things that give us hope, even if only for a moment.

I'm hopeful because I trust that Christ's rule of righteousness and justice is unfolding, even when it's hard to see.

I am hopeful because God, who astonished people by coming to us as a vulnerable baby, continues to work in surprising ways.