

Georgetown Presbyterian Church
December 2, 2018

Rev. Rachel Landers Vaagenes
Wait and See
Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:4-6

Despite the good news we heard in these few verses today, for most of the fifty-two chapters that bear his name, Jeremiah can reasonably be described as a bummer.

Chances are, you may have unfriended someone like Jeremiah on Facebook.

—Imagine getting ready to eat an ice cream cone.

-You know, dairy farmers have been hit really hard by the tariffs. As a result many farms have shut down and the cows have been transferred to larger facilities with less oversight and more suffering.¹²

—C'mon, Jerry!

—We're just celebrating, and I just got a fake Christmas tree this year to ameliorate the effects of deforestation!

—You know, in the most definitive study of the perennial real vs. fake question, an environmental consulting firm in Montreal found that an artificial tree would have to be reused for more than 20 years to be greener than buying a fresh-cut tree annually. The calculations included greenhouse gas emissions, use of resources and human health impacts.³

—Okay buddy, well get in the spirit. I bought it on Amazon, so it'll be here today?

-Did you know, working conditions at Amazon distribution centers have been shown to...

—C'mon Jerry, it's Christmas!

—Actually—ahem—It's Advent One.

Jeremiah, though exceedingly unpleasant, is not wrong. It is not Christmas yet. Advent One comes like heartburn after being overstuffed at Thanksgiving, or the credit card bill after Black Friday. Jeremiah reminds us of the real “reason for the season.” We celebrate Christmas because—despite all our good intentions and our best efforts—we are a world that needed saving.

¹ <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-connecticut-dairy-farms-trump-trade-war-20181127-story.html>

² <https://www.jsonline.com/story/money/business/2018/11/26/wisconsins-dairy-farmers-everything-hard-now/2067281002/>

³ NYTimes, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/18/business/energy-environment/18tree.html>

“[The book of Jeremiah] is commentary upon the most disastrous episodes of Judah’s history to which the Old Testament bears witness, both in their religious and political consequences.”⁴

Some quick context: It is 2600 years ago. God’s kingdom is divided in two. Israel has already fallen to the Assyrians and many Jews are scattered in exile. Judah has held on much longer as a sovereign nation, but it is eventually bested by the Babylonians and the Chaldeans in a manner far beyond the wildest nightmares of the people. Homes are torn down to defend against oncoming armies; there are bodies lining the streets—too many to be buried properly; and the greatest twin horrors: the deposition of king Zedekiah, of the house of David, and the complete destruction of the temple.

The people had turned from God and relied on political and national alliances rather than on God. The temple was known to be the seat of God. The tablets of the ten commandments were kept there in the ark of the covenant. Now it was all gone.

And God chose poor Jeremiah to tell the people why it was gone.

The people took up foreign gods and idols, and the Lord sent Jeremiah to proclaim: “Your idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried for they cannot walk.”

The LORD had other colorful messages for Judah to chastise them when they broke the covenant with the LORD that their ancestors made when they were brought out of Egypt.

And there were many other sins, individual and corporate. They trusted in mere mortals and global politics rather than God, and the leaders were amassing wealth unjustly. False prophets sought security by flattering the powerful and offering empty panaceas and flimsy assurances.

The Lord set Jeremiah in the midst of the nation to denounce the people, calling them broken pot shards, sun-bleached bones, rotten figs, and soiled loincloths.

God had a seemingly endless list of bizarre and grotesque object lessons for Jeremiah to bring to Judah, and they were as unpleasant as they were accurate.

⁴ R.E. Clements. Interpretation: Jeremiah p 3.

But despite the grim descriptions, I'm here to tell you that Jeremiah is actually a prophet of hope.

Out of the pit of despair and doom, Jeremiah turns to a vision of the future.

We read that “the days are surely coming” when the “kingdom is restored.”

Jeremiah acknowledges that the supposed glory days of King David are past. A hope for the return to the good old days is an empty hope. A cheap salvation. It ignores the fundamental rottenness of that history, in which the poor were exploited, the covenant broken, idols were worshipped, innocent were killed, and power was wielded for selfish gain.

It is not a hope that rests simply in a return to the ways things were. Restoration wouldn't mean rewinding the clock. Israel needed to change. This would not be a restoration of the gilded age of Judean national sovereignty, but a new age of God's righteousness.

Jeremiah's hope is much more radical than that. His hope is not for a change in Israel's circumstances, but for a change of its very heart. If *this* doesn't change, even if they return to the same outward glory, the cycle of sin will continue.

Jeremiah knows that for true restoration, WE need to change, and become different from what we are now. His message is that any real hope means reckoning with the sins that produced our dire circumstances.

In an almost surgical metaphor, Jeremiah announces the true hope of the people: The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house for Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant they broke ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”

The LORD makes it clear that the forgiveness does not look like the indulgence of a doting parent on a spoiled child. Israel and Judah, the people of God, will be changed. This radical hope is our hope. We too yearn for our hearts to be changed. For our hearts to grow. We want to be able to love God and our neighbor without holding back. To have our old ways and our old sins and our old divisions be forgiven, removed, healed. This is both an individual and a collective hope, for ourselves and our society.

This is not an abstract, theoretical hope for us. In Advent we remember this hope has a name. We wait on someone who can heal those divisions, who can lead us into a new way of life.

We wait on God-come-near. Jesus Christ, who enters into our brokenness and walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. Who seeks for the lost. Who lays down his life for us.

The hope of Jesus becomes real only when we give up the other things that we cling to that have led to our current state of despair. We need to relinquish our own hopes: for security, authority, control, ease...

Those hopes come at the expense of others, and are predicated on us versus them, or me versus you. A hope that divides is not of God.

But here lies the key to Jeremiah's hope.

When we despair at the thwarting of our own desires, we are shown that they were never going to be able to fulfill our deepest needs. They are revealed to be small, narrow, selfish wishes.

Their failure reminds us that there is a greater promise beyond our imagination. A promise that transcends our understanding of security, of abundance, of joy. It is the promise of Emmanuel: God-with-us.

This is the hope beyond our greatest dreams. Together with the prophet we are called not only to name suffering and injustice, not only to identify the ways in which we have sinned, but to embrace God's promised future.

In Christ, we are given a new heart, a heart that is formed by the universal love of God.

Jeremiah is a voice crying out that God is for us, and that God will be satisfied with nothing less than our redemption salvation. God in Christ has done it, and is doing it, and will bring it to completion. This is what we wait for in Advent. This is what we look forward to.

Thanks be to Jeremiah. and thanks be to the LORD. Amen!