

Advent is such a weird time. It's the beginning of our liturgical year, but it happens roughly a month before the beginning of our calendar year. It's a time when we hear Joy to the World on all the stations and in most of the shops, but we are told in our churches, "not yet. He's not here yet. We're waiting for him to be born." It's the time of year when we're (at least in theory) preparing room for Jesus to abide in our hearts, but (let's face it) we're distracted: we're busy comparing online deals for gifts we wish to give and attending holiday parties.

But even for the most pious among us, Advent is a bizarre season of the year. It's the 'already-not-yet' season. We live as the Body of Christ in the world even as we await the birth of the baby Jesus. The prophets speak to the despair of God's people as they preach a new day and a new hope despite circumstances that seem insurmountable. Their voices proclaim that the end is near, even as the words from the Book of Revelation echo from last week that God is the Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end. During Advent, we see that God's time is not measured linearly: while secular life keeps marching forward at a steady clip, the liturgical year loops backwards on itself and revisits spiritual territory that is both familiar and frighteningly new.

And so it is fitting that the prophet who rings in this new year is Jeremiah: a man who seemed to understand the circularity of God's time.

Jeremiah, born some 600 years before the birth of Jesus, lived in a time of great upheaval. King Josiah, a righteous king of Judah, died. Subsequently, the people of Judah lost their independence, and the Babylonians came and took over and devastated Jerusalem. Most of the people were forced into exile. Perhaps the worst of it was that the Temple, the place where it was believed that God physically dwelled, was being (or perhaps had just recently been) destroyed. The people were horrified: where would God go? Was God punishing them? Had they erred so badly that God was abandoning them? It was a time of deep despair among God's people.

In an effort to bring hope to his people, Jeremiah imagines a new vision: he says, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise that I made ..." Not **a** promise. **The** promise. *The* promise that God will bring a

righteous offspring of David who will act in ways that promote justice and righteousness.<sup>1</sup> A promise that hearkened back in the consciousness of Jeremiah's community so that they might remember that their God is a God of action, a God of hope, a God of righteousness and justice and mercy and work through their despair and hopelessness. Jeremiah recognized that time and again when God's people were in turmoil, it was at the very climax of crisis that something new would happen. It was at their darkest moments that light would shine and a new way would be discovered.

In every day and age, there are reasons to worry, to wonder if the world is broken beyond repair. Climate change, rape culture, the refugee crisis, political partisanship, religious extremism, racism, the opioid epidemic ... pick virtually any issue, and you've got good cause to wonder if God has gotten fed up with us, and has 'left the building.'

Because "despair is characterized by the absence of theological hope,"<sup>2</sup> God brings forward prophets who stand in the gap, pointing toward a new vision, imagining God's people as their best selves, calling us toward light and truth and righteousness and reconciliation. Despite the inevitability of God's prophets to be silenced either by exile or murder, Jeremiah and others stepped forward in faith to build up God's people by offering visions of an alternative future.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, throughout the traumatic socio-political circumstances the prophets faced in the Old Testament, that Jesus faced in the Gospels, and that countless saints have faced in the last two thousand years ... "it is precisely in these contexts that despair opens the door to creativity and hope." When the end seems to be at hand, God's people seem finally able to do the work of imagining how things *might* be in the future. And that is the theme of the Advent season.

There seems to be two characteristics that define prophetic ministry: (1) naming the suffering and injustice that is taking place, and (2) leaning into God's promised alternative future.

Jeremiah lamented their captivity, their exile, and the slaughter of thousands of God's people. The ancient Israelites cried out to God in anger and despair ~ and as they were violently removed from their homeland, they believed that God was

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Angela Bauer-Levesque's Exegetical Perspective in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol 1, page 5.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Ryan Ayers's Theological Perspective in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol 1, page 4.

being taken from them. They truly believed that they would no longer be under God's care and protection, that they would be permanently estranged from God.

As we look back on the period when Jeremiah lived, we can see that there was about to be a major theological shift in how God's people understood their relationship with God: very soon after Jeremiah's ministry, they would begin to realize that God is bigger than the Temple. They would recognize that God didn't live in a building in Jerusalem, but rather lived everywhere - in the hearts and minds of God's people, and among the relationships that God's people share with one another. The reality of "God is with us" / Emmanuel may seem like a no-brainer to us, but to them, this would be a revolutionary idea to the people of ancient Israel.

But Jeremiah's people had not quite made that theological leap yet. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made..." They had to work through their hopelessness and lean in to his prophetic imagination before their hope was realized. It seems they, like many of us, had to learn that God's promises cannot be brought about by sheer force of will, but rather by partnering with God in the advent of a new reality. They did the work, and God's promise was fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus. The ancient Israelites of course would not see this promise brought to fruition in their lifetime, but it certainly came to be.

And we see from our 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective that God had already done the work of bringing redemption and healing to the horror of their circumstances. Because God works in loopy, non-linear, cosmic time, the Righteous branch of David did in fact execute cosmic justice and righteousness in the land, and the dwelling place of God was safe in the hearts of all who love God. These things had already happened in God's timeline, but from their perspective, it hadn't yet.

The season of Advent drives home this 'already-not-yet' theme. The truth of Advent is that our deepest longings have already been realized, even as we wait for the promises of what is to come. Our God is present with us in our hardships, even when it seems as though our prayers go unheard. Our God is a God of 'yeses,' even if our circumstances seem to be shouting 'no.'

The first Sunday in Advent is New Year's Day for the Christian community, the first day of a new year in sacred time. It is both a time of hope imagined, and of trust in God's promises fulfilled. A time when endings become beginnings; when decay brings forth new growth; when the past, present and future bleed into one

state of being in the presence of Almighty God. It is a time of new, as-yet-unimagined hope.

And so I welcome you to the new liturgical year. I pray this Advent season that you may capture glimpses God's vision in new ways and cultivate your own imagination of how our world and how the Christian community could be. And I invite you to discover (or perhaps rediscover) your prophetic hope of promises fulfilled as we begin again the looping cycle of telling and living into God's sacred Story.