

Advent is a bizarre season of the year. Once again, we see the convergence of past, present and future: we live as the Body of Christ in the world even as we await both the birth of baby Jesus and his return in glory. It's the 'already-not-yet' season when we prepare our hearts for both the inbreaking of the Christ-child and the second coming of the resurrected Jesus.

During Advent, we are reminded 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.

This is the time of year when we read how the prophets speak to the despair, restlessness and complacency of God's people as they preached a new day and a new hope despite circumstances that seem insurmountable. We hear their voices proclaim that the end is near, as the words from the Book of Revelation echo from last week that God is the Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end.

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, had died. Subsequently, the people of Judah lost their independence, and the Babylonians came 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: Was God punishing them? Had they erred so badly that God was abandoning them? Where would God go? 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 ..." Note that he doesn't say 'a promise.' He says "**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> The promise that hearkened back in the

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

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. The promise that they would have what it takes to 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, religious extremism, racism, world economic markets in upheaval, the Delta variant, and now Omicron ... pick virtually any issue, and you've got good cause to wonder if God has gotten fed up with us.

"Despair, [a very human condition] is characterized by the absence of theological hope,"<sup>2</sup> yet God brings forward prophets who stand in the gap, pointing toward a new vision, imagining God's people as their best selves, calling us together, urging 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, (and 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.

Sociologists have increasingly borne witness to a phenomenon in our culture that is being named "the great resignation" – a massive wave of individuals quitting their jobs in search of something 'more', that provides more purpose and meaning to their lives than just a means to get the bills paid. There is an increasing rejection of the notion that one's ends justify the means ... and a heightened awareness and desire that one's ends be intimately connected to the means. For many, forty hours a week at a job that is unfulfilling, demeaning, disconnected from the priorities of one's life is no longer suitable for a large swath of the workforce. These

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

individuals are now attempting to imagine how things might be in their future, and seeking to align what they do with the values they hold most dear ~ be it a new vocation, a new way of living into their vocation, or perhaps simply a living wage.

This idealism is butting heads with the reality that some jobs simply need to get done for our economy to work. That said, the mass desire for meaning-making is beautiful to behold, and it's exciting to me to see how the people of God will help provide direction, insight, and opportunity for those wishing to dig deeper and integrate their means with their ends.

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. As such, I see the Church as being called to live into its prophetic ministry: naming suffering and injustice, and leaning into God's promise.

Jeremiah lamented his people's captivity, their exile, and the slaughter of thousands. 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 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: eventually 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.

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 Jeremiah's prophetic imagination. It seems they, like many of us, had to learn that God's promises are brought about by partnering with God in the advent of a new reality. 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 trauma 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. (And the physical temple was rebuilt.) 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 'yes,' even if our circumstances seem to be shouting 'no.'

Today also is the beginning of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. The special menorah for Hanukkah has eight branches, rather than the traditional seven. Eight branches celebrate the miracle of the Jewish liberation of the Temple by the Maccabees, about 400 years after Jeremiah's time. On that first night, there was only enough oil to burn for one day, but the menorah continued to illuminate the Temple for eight days. But as many Jewish teachers would say, there was a greater miracle than the lamps that didn't go out.

“Knowing that there was not enough oil, the Maccabees should have waited until enough was available. But on that first day, they felt the people needed to be given hope. To light the Menorah with not enough oil would be an audacious act of hope that would inspire a nation. **Optimism is a belief**, a feeling that things *will be better*. **Hope is an act** that declares we can and *will make things better*. On that first day, the Maccabees demonstrated to the people the radical notion of hope and how we *can always make things better*. That was the miracle of the first day. More than lighting a lamp and praying that it not go out. But *demonstrating* the miracle of hope that can never be extinguished.”<sup>3</sup>

I love the coincidence that today is not only the beginning of Hannukah, but also the first Sunday in Advent, as it's New Year's Day for the Christian community, the first day of a new year in sacred time. We, too, light our first candle of the season, as we also participate in a time of hope imagined, and of trust in God's promises fulfilled. A time when endings become beginnings; when decay brings

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Victor Urecki, 11.28.21, also referencing Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

forth new growth; when the past, present and future bleed into one state of being in the presence of Almighty God.

And so I welcome you to the newest non-linear loop of the Church 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 our 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.