

“The Best Is Yet to Come”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
November 28, 2021 – First Sunday of Advent
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

Judah and Israel were wastelands, having been utterly destroyed by invading armies. The city of Jerusalem was in ruins; its glorious temple, demolished. The temple mount, where Yahweh, the God of Judah and Israel, had been worshipped for centuries, was silent. The people were conquered and removed from the land, having being forcibly relocated to the distant land of Babylon. The people had no reason to hope for anything good, but looked ahead only to more humiliation and complete destruction as those who were victorious over them imposed their own language and culture, including the worship of their gods.

These were the bleak times in which the prophet Jeremiah lived when he wrote the words of today’s reading. But, as we read, Jeremiah was not without hope. Though Israel and Judah had been cut down like a great tree, with only a stump remaining, Jeremiah saw something beyond the stump: A shoot rising from it that would grow to become a tree greater than the one from which it arose: A tree that was vibrant with justice and green with righteousness. The message of Jeremiah to his people was for them to glimpse this vision along with him and to take hope, knowing that even in their desperate times, God has not abandoned them and is at work, growing something new and good among them. Even if they could not sense God’s work with their own eyes in those troubled times, the day of salvation was surely coming.

From Jeremiah and other prophets of God came this hopeful vision for a hopeless people. From the prophetic tradition of the time arose the belief that God would intervene in the world on their behalf through a Messiah, one appointed and anointed by God to establish a truly just and righteous realm on earth.

In the time of Jesus, hundreds of years after the time of Babylonian captivity, the people were still longing for the just and righteous reign of God to be fully realized. One of the core messages of Jesus during his own time of prophetic teaching was that the day of God establishing God’s just and righteous realm on earth was near. It would soon be established by the Son of Man, another title for

God's Messiah, who would come from heaven to judge and make things right on earth.

Scholars disagree concerning who this Son of Man was in Jesus' mind, with some believing that Jesus himself claimed to be this Messiah, and others believing that it was the followers of Jesus, such as the writers of our gospels, that assigned him the role of the Son of Man, who would come again from the heavens to begin God's just reign on earth. But it is very clear that from the earliest days of the Christian tradition, Jesus' followers believe that he was this heaven-sent Messiah, who began the work of establishing a righteous and just reign of God on earth and that he will return as the heaven-sent Son of Man and see this work through to completion.

This is our hope during the Advent season. As we move closer to winter, and each day gets a bit shorter and a bit darker, we know that the days are coming soon when we shall have more light and more warmth. We light candles as reminders that even as it gets darker and colder, there is light and the light will grow. The work started by Jesus of establishing a just realm on earth, which gives light and life to people, will grow, giving people more light and more life, even as it seems to get darker all around us.

We need this hopeful message this morning. While we are neither living in exile in Babylon, as were our spiritual ancestors in the time of Jeremiah, nor living under the crushing thumb of Roman rule, as were our spiritual ancestors in the time of Jesus, our own days are difficult and distressed.

The deadly pandemic continues and evolves as the virus that is attacking us is ever mutating and evolving. We attack one another, using the guns that outnumber people in our country and even our cars as lethal weapons when people gather for peaceful activities as they did in Waukesha, Wisconsin last Sunday and in several shopping malls around the country on Friday.

Our violence against one another and the planet on which we live is causing less people to have children, as recent studies have shown that less and less American adults are choosing to have children, and that a growing percentage of those who have decided to not have kids have done so primarily because of climate change or the state of the world more generally.

While it often seems that we're living out the script of dystopian horror or sci-fi film or the bleak lyrics of a heavy metal song, in which everything is dark will get darker until we destroy ourselves completely, we should take hope for we believe that God loves us too much to leave us alone. Because God cares for us, and shows love for us especially when we face difficult times, we have hope. There is a light shining in the darkness, and the light will grow brighter and show us better ways to live -- ways that are full of the light of justice and righteousness.

As our tilted planet spins and wobbles as it travels around the sun, there will be much spinning and wobbling and changing of seasons, but the planet will move ever onward and forward towards justice, as Martin Luther King noted, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." We saw movements toward becoming a more just society this week in verdicts against those who robbed Ahmaud Arbery of his life, and we saw a similar movement toward justice in a verdict earlier this year against the one who robbed George Floyd of his life. Young people are more keenly aware of the harm we are causing to our planet, and we see movements among our children and youth to take the crisis of climate change seriously and to alter our behaviors for the sake of the planet's future.

Even in the darkness candles of hope shine. This Advent season, let us pay attention to the light shining and growing among us, in us, and through us. Let us believe that the best is yet to come, that God will continue to make something beautiful and good out of our broken world and that God will breathe new life into each of our lives. The best is yet to come. May we take hope today and every day. Amen.