

## **A Righteous Branch**

Jeremiah 33:14-16

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Several years ago, I visited with one of our members who had heard her father call her during the night. When I visited her in the nursing home, she said his voice was so clear that she answered and struggled to get up. I soon came to realize that this was the first sign that she would spend her final year of life in a twilight zone that blended past and present. Initially, I tried to correct her (which was a mistake), but later I accepted her recollections of her day, about people—long dead—with whom she had chatted, and places—far away in time and distance—she'd visited.

Twilight time. Celtic folk in Scotland and Ireland call it "the time between the times," the enchanted moments at dusk and at dawn when the veil between this world and the world beyond us is thin, and we seem to breathe its air.

The church exists to remind us in this season of Advent that we live in the time between the times, between what is dying and what is being born, between the "already" of Christ's reign, which we celebrated last Sunday, and the "not yet" of Advent and Christ's coming birth.

The church year which begins on this first Sunday in Advent draws us into a great drama, but the pull of its narrative is not away from our lives but more deeply into them. We hear words of comfort, like those of Jeremiah in our text today, directed to distant peoples run over by ancient history. Devastation and exile, which is Jeremiah's history, are also present-day realities that allow us entry into this holy moment, this time between the times.

Jeremiah stood on the streets of Jerusalem and announced its destruction. The announcement gave him no pleasure; it brought him to tears. As Old Testament scholar Abraham Heschel said, a prophet is one who knows what time it is. Jeremiah knew that it was evening for the Israelites, a time for Jerusalem's inhabitants to relinquish their hold on all of their illusory hopes to be saved from destruction—political alliances, personal piety, and the pipe dreams of sunnier prophets—they were all paper matches against the gathering dark. After a long and terrible night, said Jeremiah, the days are surely coming when a brilliant morning would dawn led by "a righteous branch," from the blood line of King David, and a generation of God's people would wake up in safety in a place renamed "righteousness."

We must remind ourselves that there is work to do as we wait for the Lord of History, that righteous branch in this twilight hour between the times. The best way to wait is to work for the kingdom—for justice and righteousness in the land. That's exactly what Jeremiah did with his life.

Mother Teresa once told a story about the time she came down with a terrible fever. Her temperature climbed and she became delirious. She had a vision of being at the gates of heaven and telling St. Peter that she was ready to pass from this world to the next. But St. Peter refused her entry into heaven. Mother Teresa asked why. Peter replied: "Because there are no slums in heaven."

We could easily trivialize this season, this beginning of a new church year. We might easily spiritualize this season and see it only as inner preparation for the joyous tide of Christmas. But waiting for the Christ Child is also spent working for the cause of Jeremiah's Righteous Branch. That cause is justice and righteousness in the land. Peter turned Mother Teresa back from heaven's gate because there was work for her left on earth. Her vocation was in the slums of Kolkata (Calcutta).

Awhile back I clipped an editorial in the *New York Times* written by the rock-star Bono. It asserted that America holds the keys to solving the three greatest threats we face on this planet: extreme poverty, extreme ideology, and extreme climate change. We can see and feel the devastation which characterizes all three, and yet there are the seeds of hope that our faith in the coming Christ child, that righteous branch, has planted in each one.

If we are to be ready for the Lord, then we must name the darkness that is a shroud of death across our nation: that is extreme poverty. Advent could be the season to identify the causes of poverty. While about 11% of Americans—over 38 million people-- are considered to be living at or below the poverty line, another 60% live paycheck to paycheck, incredibly vulnerable to whatever economic shockwave comes along, like inflation, which has created long lines at our local food pantries in recent months. The River Food Pantry on the north side of Madison served 3,800 people in the week before Thanksgiving, more people than it has served in its 18-year history in similar weeks.

What about a livable wage? What about health care and childcare for everyone who needs them? What economic rearrangements must be made to break the back of poverty? These are big questions, and Advent is a time to ask them.

As we light the candles of Advent, we must acknowledge that we have some of the light but not all of it. Extreme ideology is also a plague in our nation right now. Waiting for the Christ Child might best be time spent listening to those with whom we disagree, along with those who have been deeply wounded by our political climate's toxicity. Can we be civil in our religious and political discourse around our holiday gatherings this year, in this time between the times, and can we be vigilant in our pursuit of justice, looking out for and speaking up for those who are the collateral damage of the extreme ideology that has swept across our land?

Might we be more gracious in making room in the household of God for Christians of all persuasions? Is not Advent a time for more interfaith cooperation as we wait for the One valued in Islam, Judaism and Christianity? This Child of Mary we await is larger than our own world. Jesus is the world's child, and we must live into such radical inclusion.

Bono's third issue, extreme climate change, is perhaps our planet's greatest long-term threat. Temperatures are rising worldwide due to greenhouse gases trapping more heat in the atmosphere. Droughts are becoming longer and more extreme around the world. Tropical storms are becoming more severe due to warmer ocean water temperatures. The evidence keeps piling up.

Climate scientists tell us we have it without our means to reverse course, but time is running out--and that is also the message of Advent and why waiting is so difficult. We're past the point of denial about the state of our environment. Might Advent be a time for atoning for our environmental sins and taking steps towards a more sustainable, more hopeful future?

"Jesus' ministry," says Walter Brueggemann in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, "takes place between the clinging and the yearning." That's where we find ourselves in Advent, in the "time between the times" when the veil between worlds grows thin and the holy calls to us from the world to come. It is both evening time and morning time, when we learn what we must relinquish and to what we must open our hands, what is dying and what is being born. Let's not let the shallowness of Christmas consumerism this Advent season overshadow the deep work we are called to in this time of waiting, this time between the times.

Amen.