

Advent 1: 12/2/18

Hope

“I dwell in possibility”

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’

SERMON: Begin with prayer (May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, Oh Lord, my rock and redeemer.)

I begin this morning with a poem from Emily Dickinson:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

The theme for his first Sunday of Advent is hope. Emily Dickinson so beautifully portrays hope as both fragile and resilient, found in the most unexpected places, always present and not asking anything back from us.

Hope. It's a word I've wrestled with over the years. When I was training as a chaplain, I wrote a reflection paper entitled: Is hope a 4 letter word? Well, yes it is, of course. But is it bad, does it lead us away from living in the present, from being fully engaged in our lives? I was beginning my deep dive into meditation at that time as well, and saw that hope, or how I was defining hope then, often lead us out of the present moment to wish for our lives to be different than they are. What we hope for and what we wish for are often tangled together.

The word "hope" is used to talk about possible situations that we desire in the past, present or future. The important thing to note is that these situations are POSSIBLE. For example: I hope you had a good time at the party last night. Or: I haven't looked outside yet. I hope it's not raining.

On the other hand, "wish" is used to talk about situations that we desire, but which are the opposite of the current reality or which are impossible, like: I wish I didn't have to work tomorrow. (In reality, I have to work tomorrow, but I don't want to). Or, I wish I were tall. (In reality, I'm short, but I want to be tall).

Hope is about possibility, even in the bleakest of times. I recently changed my email signature to include the title of this sermon - another gem from Emily Dickinson. I dwell in possibility. That's hope. It's present tense, it's possible. It's choosing to be open to what's here, now. Oh, that's how I want to live - with hope as a reality for present and future.

"When we choose hope, we define what matters most to us," writes Shane Lopez, psychologist and author of *"Making Hope Happen"*.

After all, hope was what powered the first African-American man to be elected President of the United States. Hope is the news that developing nations are leading

the way in the use of solar and wind power - showing wealthier nations that renewables are economically sustainable. And hope is how extreme poverty has fallen for the first time to below ten percent of the world's population.

“Hope is created moment by moment through our deliberate choices,” writes Lopez.¹

Hope is created moment by moment through our deliberate choices. That gives us the responsibility to choose how we respond, no matter what's in front of us.

In our reading from the book of Jeremiah this morning, our text sounds so hopeful. But when you dive into the middle of a text like this reading from the lectionary, you can so easily miss or forget the wider context and story. And so to understand what's happening to the people of Israel when Jeremiah spoke those words, it helps to go back to the beginning of Jeremiah 32 to set the stage: In the beginning of chapter 32, Jeremiah is imprisoned in the courtyard of King Zedekiah. The reason he had been placed under this kind of house arrest was because Zedekiah could not stand all doom and gloom, all defeat and destitution that Jeremiah was preaching. Zedekiah had had about all the bad news he could stand and so locked Jeremiah up in the hopes of also *shutting* him up.

Ironically it was only then, when he's confined, that Jeremiah's tone did pick up a bit. In chapter 32 he was instructed by God to buy a field as a symbol of future hope. At a time when all the real estate in Israel was at rock-bottom prices due to the fact that soon the whole land would be overrun by Babylonians, Jeremiah bought a field as a way of saying that he believed—at the Lord's behest—that they'd be back some day. A day would return for God's people when holding property in the Promised Land would make sense again.

¹ From McQuaid, Michelle. *Psychology Today* (online). 7/26/2016. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/functioning-flourishing/201607/what-happens-when-hope-is-lost>

Now in this 33rd chapter we get these promising words of prophecy about the Lord our Righteousness restoring the fortunes of God's people in fulfillment of every promise God ever made. But how different they sound in our ears when we hear them delivered by Jeremiah out of a context of suffering, of arrest, and delivered also at a time when Israel was teetering on the brink of national disaster and of a period of tremendous suffering, shame and tragedy. Yet it is precisely out of this context that this message of restoration, salvation and hope comes.

When we look at the text, Jeremiah in this 33rd chapter reminds us that even in the midst of life's worst woes, even in a time of collapsing securities and disorientation, God has a word. God has a plan. God has a gracious set of promises that will be fulfilled. Destitution does not have the last word. The tragedies that come do not ultimately define us. God's ways will not be thwarted by a bad economy, by unemployment, by disease, by outright poverty, or even by death itself.²

That's hope, isn't it? I heard a story of a man, Joe, who returned to his neighborhood in New York that was devastated by Superstorm Sandy, back in September of 2012. Houses everywhere in his neighborhood had been smashed by water, trees, or both. This man's own house had been torn apart by a falling 30-foot pine tree. But as clean-up crews broke down that tree to remove it, the man saved the top 7 feet of the tree and planted it upright in his front yard as a kind of pre-Christmas Christmas Tree, in September—as a symbol of hope for his neighborhood. He dug out a few surviving ornaments from his house and hung them on the tree - white lights and a big red balls. Soon neighbors added symbols of the storm itself—surgical masks, battered coffee

² Hoezee, Scott. *The Center for Excellence in Preaching*.
http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/advent-1c-2/?type=old_testament_lectionary

cups, and the like. It was a sign of resilience, a sign of hope and of a desire to rebuild in the midst of devastation.³

God's way is a way of hope. Even when there seems to be no way forward.

In today's scripture, in these few verses, the word "righteous" or "righteousness" is used 3 times. Whenever a word is used repetitively in a text it bears a second look. Listen again to the scripture:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

I must say, when the Advent materials came in the Leader Magazine this fall, I wasn't thrilled to see Righteousness as the theme. Righteousness has been another one of those words of which I was highly suspicious. But, thanks to some study and to Sharon Spicher, who has embraced that word with love and enthusiasm, I am coming around.

You see, a righteous person is not one who lives a religiously pious life, the common though incorrect interpretation of this word. No, the righteous one, she is one who follows the correct path, and does not depart from the path (way) of God. The Ancient Hebrews were a nomadic people who traveled a circuit through the wilderness,

³ <https://nypost.com/2012/11/15/sandy-damaged-si-prepares-for-president-obamas-visit-with-disaster-christmas-tree/>

following the same paths from pasture to pasture, campsite to campsite and watering hole to watering hole. Anyone leaving the path might become lost and wander aimlessly in the wilderness. So to be righteous was to follow God's path, as in psalm 23 - "God will lead me paths of righteousness" -the promise of righteousness is that God will show us the Way, even through the dark valleys.

Like I said, "The Lord is our righteousness" is the theme for this year's Mennonite Advent resources. The planners of these resources note, "When we say that God is our righteousness we mean that God is the ultimate example of what GOOD looks and acts like." They go on to note that in both the Hebrew and Greek texts, "righteousness is often paired with justice."

And so we've begun the waiting for something new to be born. And we, too, are invited to live out of this place of hope - we, as followers of Jesus, are called to live righteously - to follow the Way, God's way, of justice and goodness.

The Lord is our righteousness. The hope expressed here in Jeremiah is both present and future oriented. New life is coming for the Israelites who are on the brink of disaster, and God is promising that the one to come, that the Branch that springs forth from David's line, will call the people to follow the Way, God's path, and to seek justice - he will care for the marginalized and invites us to do the same.

Hope for the people in Jeremiah's time involved both believing that God would restore them to the land as well as hope for a future of righteousness and justice. Jeremiah was spreading hope in a bleak and hopeless time.

"When we choose hope, we define what matters most to us" psychologist Shane Lopez reminds us. That's what Jeremiah was doing. Hope happens when we actively

pursue what's possible. Lopez teaches that hope is contagious. How we think about the future - how we hope - determines how well we live our lives. We are called to live righteously, to follow God's path - one that involves seeking justice and actively pursuing hope.

If hope is contagious, what is our responsibility? In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor, speaks of the connection between hope and our body's physical ability to live. That when prisoners had no hope, or courage, their immune systems failed and they would much more easily die from disease. He talks of a scientist who was considering suicide, who felt that life had nothing to offer him any longer - and how it was only when he found that life still expected something of him, that the series of books he was writing and left undone could not be finished by anyone else, that he was able to strive for life. Frankl found great truth in Nietzsche's words: "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*". We need hope, realistic hope, and possibly a shift in perspective that it's not what we expect from life, or I'll say God, but what life, what our eternal source of Hope, asks of us. Our answer, he says, must consist of right action and right conduct. We must live righteously. Hope involves asking what Life is calling us to do - and to righteously walk in God's path to do that work. Righteousness and justice.⁴

God's invitation for us is not impossible - it fits who we are and where we are, here, in this time and place. Watching and waiting is to be done in a stance of hopeful living. Living filled with justice. How might the God of righteousness be inviting you live out your life - caring for the least of these, maybe caring for your own body and spirit through turning off the screen and finding hope in what's around you? Life, the God of Hope, calls us to right action and right conduct. What might that look like for you?

⁴ Frankl, Viktor, 1959. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Beacon Press.