

“The Little Book of Consolation”

Jeremiah 33.14–16

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 3 December 2006

Most of what Jeremiah had to say wasn’t...well...all that uplifting. In fact, you could say that Jeremiah had something of a doom-and-gloom kind of attitude in warning the people of Israel to clean up their act. In fact, our early Puritan forbears delivered a genre of sermon filled with dark images and foreboding, which was called “the Jeremiad.”

Here is part of Jeremiah’s lament, a prophecy of the coming exile of the chosen people in Babylon: “Hear and give ear; do not be haughty, for the Lord has spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God before he brings darkness and before your feet stumble on the mountains at twilight; while you look for light, he turns it into gloom and makes it deep darkness. But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord’s flock has been taken captive. Say to the king and queen mother; ‘Take a lowly seat, for your beautiful crown has come down from your head.’”¹

But after 29 chapters of doom, Jeremiah’s tone turns to consolation, and the chapters beginning with 30 are sometimes called the Book of Consolation, detailing the future restoration of Israel and Judah, the prophecy of a new covenant, healing of the people, and where we hear today’s text: with the righteous branch from King David’s line. So, here again is part of Jeremiah’s prophecy; this is the Jewish Publication Society translation: “I will raise up a true branch of David’s line, and he shall do what is just and right in the land.”

Usually, during Advent, we hear a parallel prophecy from Isaiah: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse [who was David’s father] and a branch shall grow out of his roots...with righteousness, he shall judge the poor and with equity the meek of the earth.”²

I’m not a great gardener, but I know that you can propagate cuttings from a plant, or shove three toothpicks into an avocado pit and set it in water, and it will start growing. I also know that something like propagation happens with certain trees. For instance, our neighbors have a cottonwood tree that is trying to establish a grove in the middle of our lawn. And even though I cut down a failing aspen last year, it is still sending up suckers.

Even when you think something is as dead as a doornail, it sometimes springs back to life. So, that shoot of Jesse – that sprouts up like those suckers in my backyard – is the heir to and the completion of the first planting.



There are times when I have felt that my faith is about as vibrant as a tree stump: dormant or fully dead. And it’s important to realize that we all hit spiritual “dry spots,” which may extend into full-blown spiritual drought. And there are times when we feel as though our faith might be frozen, buried under a foot of snow with daytime highs in the low 20s.

During the cold last week, I was thinking this week of Christina Rossetti’s poem that we sometimes sing this time of year: “In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan. Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.” Haven’t you ever had a time when your sense of the holy, your sense of wonder, seemed entombed in the ice that she describes?

¹ Jer. 14.15–18

² Isa. 11.1–4, NRSV

Advent can be like that sometimes. When you think your faith is dormant or gone...when God seems absent...when your prayer life is not rich (or when it's nonexistent). Sometimes, it might even feel as if we're living in exile from God.

This is a time of year when we are called upon to be overtly jolly, even if we don't feel like it. When we are implored to spend more than we need to or ought to. When time seems too short and we have even less time to spend with family and friends...and even with God.



And then something happens. We've been living in exile. We've begun to lose sight of what life and faith are all about. But, something happens. Some little, seemingly random flicker of light. Not a floodlight. Not a searchlight or a beacon. But a flicker.

And if we're ready for it, if we expect it, if we are waiting, maybe, just maybe, we can kindle the flame. At this expectant time of year we might just expect that something is going to happen.

As I look at the expectant exuberance of my five-year-old son Christopher, I see the contrast is stark: It isn't so easy for cynical adults like me to allow ourselves to see the spark and to catch the excitement and to open ourselves to the mystery of life. But, what if we just try?

Advent is a time when we can try to provide a space within our lives and within ourselves...a space for the renewal of our faith, our relationship with the holy, our oneness with Christ. How do we make space? For each of us it looks a little different, but we can start by setting aside even five minutes a day for reflection and prayer (which doesn't have to be praying *for* anything, but rather just sitting in the stillness of God). Or maybe going to see The Nativity Story at the cinema. Or maybe lighting an Advent wreath at home. We can allow ourselves to get swept up in the expectation and excitement that *something new* is about to occur.



The text from Jeremiah is all about something that is never mentioned explicitly. It's the feeling of a people who have been worn down by deportation, by exile, living in a foreign land as captives. It is the sense of early Christians who were persecuted and killed because of the religion they lived out. It is the feeling of African-Americans held in slavery generation after generation, but whose spirit was never defeated.

The word that never occurs is a simple one: **hope**. Hope that one day, we will be led out of exile and returned to our homeland and that a new king will lead us in ways of justice and righteousness.

We need to keep our hearts open to the possibility of hope in our future. When we see the flicker, when we open ourselves up to possibility, when we welcome God into our lives, we make space for hope.

A new king has emerged from the line of David, who deals justly and rightly with all God's people. He comes not as a generalissimo, but as an itinerant preacher; not as a wizened sage, but as an infant; not in wealth, but in poverty.

Where will he reside? On nights when there is no room in the inn? On days when the palace is occupied by Caesar and Herod? Where will he reside in our day and age: a time of war, a season of indifference, a century of violence? *That's up to you.*

In this season of preparation and expectation, let every heart prepare him room.
Amen.