

Promise
First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2015
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Text: Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21:25-36

I said a couple weeks ago that since my older daughters are out of the house that I can now use them for sermon illustrations – but here Bethany is home for the holiday weekend, and I’m still going to use a story about her! – and she said it was OK. In her younger years, Bethany had some fears about robbers and kidnappers – not unusual worries for a kid to have, but still tough – and a bit tough on the parent too because Bethany especially seemed to have these worries at about 3 in the morning...and like clockwork she would show up at the side of my bed... “Daddy...I’m scared”...and so we would talk about that there weren’t going to be any robbers and kidnappers coming and I would tuck her back into bed: ‘you’re safe – I promise’. But Bethany was not so easily assuaged: “but how do you KNOW I’m safe – how can you be SURE?!” – and at some point, I had a poignant parenting moment of having to say – of having to admit both to Bethany and to myself – that I could not promise safety for certain. What instead I could promise was love and care that she could count on. That didn’t stop the nighttime worries, but maybe that truth about promises in life was an honesty we both needed to share.

“The days are surely coming” says the LORD “when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel” – there’s a promise: about righteousness and justice in the land - about God as the maker and keeper of that promise: “The LORD is our righteousness”. It’s a promise given at a particular time and place and to a particular people – but I think that promise in Jeremiah is a chance too, to wonder more broadly about the promises of God in our particular time and place.

In Jeremiah this promise comes to the people of Israel in a particularly bleak time, as exile to Babylon has destroyed any sense of identity and hope and future as a people. If you read most of the rest of Jeremiah, it is full of many harsh judgments from God that speak of the present dire circumstances being a consequence of Israel’s blatant unfaithfulness to God – or you could say, the people’s disregard for righteousness and justice – which are the very things spoken of in this

promise that we hear from God, that God will establish justice and righteousness. Which makes you begin to notice that this promise is all about God: this passage really doesn't tell anyone to do anything – it just says God will fulfill this promise. But what if we ask about that future promise: 'so what?!' – and I mean the 'so what?' partly just as a good question to ask of any text – trying to see why God would say this and what difference it would make; yet I mean it too for us to ask of our faith and to think too what might be asked us by someone without faith – wondering if some kind of promised future is what our faith in God is mostly or any or all about.

So to do that I just want to think for a bit about the word "promise" – it's a really interesting word – "promise". Seems like we mostly, initially, hear it as a future kind of word: promise as something that is to be done or given or fulfilled at a later time: as simple as 'I promise to pay for the 2 apple pies I took from the Fish Club sale' (still need to do that), to God promising a day of righteousness and justice. But promise can have a very present meaning too – promises of love and care...those promises are made as very present commitments, something real in that moment that will continue. Such present promises do not, cannot, always continue – but perhaps the parent-child promise is the best example of one that does...a present promise that endures – love no matter what. Promise is future and present, linked – but it is something else too: promise is the quality of something that moves into, toward, something more...when we say something "has promise" we are saying it is a situation or person or thing that holds the capacity to flourish – we are naming even a power to create, to bring about life. Promise is interesting: you don't reach it unless you have it; and to have it is to reach for something that is not yet.

But lest you think I'm just enjoying playing with the idea of promise- which I am! – seeing those shades of meaning in promise has to do with the "so what?" of God's promises – and to see that fully we need to check in with Luke 21 first. We hear Jesus speak in today's passage of distressed times the likes of which the people of Jeremiah's time would know well – times of distress among nations and in creation that we can say we know well too – and the early church formed in this Gospel time was well aware of the same things in their world...which seems to give the idea that what Jesus evokes here is perhaps not so much just a word about the future as it is a

word about life in this world. We hear nothing in scripture today of a promise from God that is about safety or superiority for those with faith in God, but what we do hear is a call to live in the reality of this broken world defined by a particular identity: as people of promise; not so much the future kind or even the present kind of promise, but the way of living that holds promise for our lives and for world; people of promise that see our lives holding the power to make life flourish through God's ways of righteousness and justice. Jesus says "do not be weighed down" by what you see around you – Jesus' concern is that we do not take on what we see around us as our identity. Which means that to be a people of promise is very different than pessimism or optimism – we are not a people defined by the pessimism of despair or resignation or reactivity or fear or cynicism; and we are also not people defined by some kind of easy optimism that closes its eyes to complexity or that simply trusts in progress or that oddly writes off this present world with a promise of the next. Not an optimist or a pessimist, but trust - trust in the God of promise whose Spirit is present to bring God's ways of righteousness and justice into fruition; trust that our lives as followers of Christ create something real that is part of God's justice and righteousness.

In the time of Jeremiah and the early church and Hope Church, the distress of the nations is present – and in all those times, people of faith do not know the future time of God's promises being fulfilled; but in all of those times the Spirit of God speaks: the promise is present, and promise is within us. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are witnesses to this truth - the God of promise is with us. And it is in that faith that we trust the future to God – I've figured out it's not in my hands or yours, so we place it in God's hands – as we engage the present with promise.

Live with righteousness – not self-righteousness – but life of love and integrity and grace that nourishes those around you and flourishes within you – God's righteousness that gives a life of promise. Live for justice – not human justice but God's justice – human community created to nourish true life; community that holds promise for all.

Whether to our children or to ourselves, we must come to grips with what promises are about in life; and whether it is robbers and kidnapers or any of the brokenness around us or that is present for others, I think what I would now say is that we are part of a people that will not have

our lives or our world defined by such things – but instead we live into the promise of a world in which such fears should have no place, God’s world created for righteousness and justice: a way of living that holds true promise for all God’s children. Thanks be to God. AMEN.