

“DAYS ARE COMING”

Jeremiah 31:31-34, 38-40; 33:14-16

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Assyria has already conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. Jeremiah, from the tribe of Benjamin, may be a refugee in Jerusalem when his prophetic ministry begins. It will span forty years. At first he is a vocal critic of Israel's failure to abide by the Mosaic Law. When the book of Deuteronomy is discovered in the temple, he's pretty much goes silent, probably because King Josiah initiates reforms based on the book. But Josiah dies and the new king returns to the old idolatries and violations of the covenant.

While that's happening, the politics to the north is in flux. The Assyrians fade, the Neo-Babylonians rise and then give way to the Babylonians and King Nebuchadnezzar. During this thirty year period Jeremiah has been warning Jerusalem of the trouble to the north, essentially saying that God would allow Israel to fall because of its faithlessness.

In 596, the king is taken into exile, and a governor is set up to manage the city. Ten years later, a revolt is put down, the city and the temple are sacked and its elite are carted off to Babylon.

Jeremiah warned them in various ways, sometimes saying this was going to happen, sometimes saying that it could be put off if they changed their ways. Those who remained behind live in poverty and famine. He writes the exiles, advising them to make a home in the land that they've come to, "to seek its welfare."

He's not been a popular guy. His life threatened numerous times. But then he's been all about judgment and the call to repentance. Near the end of his prophetic period, when Jerusalem is in ruins and its leaders in exile, he changes his tune. "The days are coming..." says Jeremiah. He promises three things: a new covenant in which all the people will know God, a sacred city where the gates are rebuilt to their former glory, and a new king of the line of David to rule over them.

The days are coming when a righteous king will rule over you. This is not just about the restoration of the monarchy. It's a righteous branch, a king not prone to corruption, a king who serves all the people, not just those who can pay, or those with power. I'd like to say, it's what we all want, but it isn't. Those with means prefer a corruptible leader. That's what Israel's problem was. Read through Kings sometime. So and so reigned for so many years and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

It's the poor, the hungry, the stranger, and the marginalized who are interested in a righteous ruler, interested in the king who sees them. The poor of Jerusalem are no more

hopeful in the return of the exiles, than our poor are in the transition to a new administration today. But days are coming, says Jeremiah, when a righteous branch will rule the land. There's hope in that.

And days are coming when the gates will be secure, and its sacred ground will extend beyond the city. This is a promise to a people who have known times of war, who have known war that came right up to the threshold of their homes and then came right on through. They have seen buildings reduced to rubble. We've seen similar images from Gaza and Lebanon, from Ukraine and Syria, and a host of other places over the years. These things don't belong to our experience, but we'd surely love to see our schools and gathering places become sacred. A lot of people despair over gun violence that crosses over the thresholds of our lives. Jeremiah says, "The days are coming...."

And the days are coming when God will make a new covenant. The law will be written on their hearts. They shall all know God, from the least to the greatest. You may recall the story of Adam and Eve in the garden who had the run of the place except that they should not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of course, they ate, and ever since that day, people had trouble discerning the good from the evil. There was a flood because the wickedness had gotten so bad. There was the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, but then there was Sodom and Gomorrah. There was the covenant with Moses and the Ten Commandments, but it didn't seem to keep their kings in line. And of course, today, we fret over the number of our leaders who seem to lack a moral compass; but not just leaders. Daily, we get scams in our mail and over the phone trying to relieve us of our money. But Jeremiah says, "Days are coming, when everyone will know right from wrong, when their desire will be for the good."

We don't find ourselves in the same circumstances as Israel in the sixth century BCE, but we long for the same things: a righteous ruler, sacred places, and a community with conscience. Louise Conner wrote on the ecodisciple blog: "When I think of those being targeted for violence because of their sexual orientation, being bombed for living in a place that a neighboring country wants to claim, or losing their homes and habitats under rising water from causes they themselves have little or no responsibility for, I rethink what it means to lack hope. Hope becomes more difficult when you are powerless."

It's hard to hope with even a cursory glance around the world. But hope is where we start every advent. It's how we begin a new church year. "Days are coming. God will soon be here." We have lots of questions about the flood and Noah, but what if we focus on the rainbow, the sign of a new covenant that God makes with the whole earth. As Ann Lamott says, "What if we focus on what the bad event brings forth, like new lands and life and starting over, rather than on the fact that people do horrible things like shoot kids. If we instead focus on the shootings, it's too easy to lose all hope in life and humanity." She goes on to say, "Yeah, someone *should* hit the great reset button in the sky. Notice that it is God who repents, is converted, at the end of the Noah story. God realizes that He or

She overreacted, and promises never to do it again. God gave the people the rainbow as the promise, whenever the light of the sun shines through the rain. If God gets to start over, then it's a free-for-all, even for cowardly lions like me" (p. 184).

Days are coming and may already be here if we are willing to receive the invitation to begin again, to start over, to have God's desires written on our hearts, to receive that promise. Louise Connor wonders if, "this Advent, those of us in more comfortable places and who have relative affluence, security, and power, might think less about our own need for hope and more about being agents of hope for others. For followers of Jesus, this has always been a core call of discipleship and is a mindset worth cultivating."

Something to think about, but let me give Anne Lamott the last word. She closes her book, *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope*, with these words: "I worry myself sick about the melting ice caps, the escalating arms race, and the polluted air as I look forward with hope to the cleansing rains, the coming spring, the warmth of summer, the student marches.... We have all we need to come through. Against all odds, no matter what we've lost, no matter what messes we've made over time, no matter how dark the night, we offer and are offered kindness, soul, light, and food, which create breath and spaciousness, which create hope, sufficient unto the day" (pp. 188-189).

Amen.

Resources:

Louise Conner, <https://www.ecodisciple.com/blog/advent-hope/>

Anne Lamott, *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope*. Riverhead Books: New York NY, 2018.