

Hope in Growing Potatoes
Luke 21:25-36
December 2, 2012
The Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker

Let us pray:

As Advent begins this year, we immediately hear God's assertion: "I will fulfill the promise I made...I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up...Jerusalem will live in safety."

Patience

Christians are Advent people. That is, Christians are waiting people. We live year-round in the intersection between promise and fulfillment. In Advent, we believe that the promise of God's future is taking place beneath and behind it all. What is happening underneath, what we cannot see, is nevertheless real.

The Scripture lessons this morning herald the coming of the Son of Man, calling the listener to have eyes to see the signs, and the good sense to be ready. Jesus tells us that there are signs that indicate the arrival, the advent, the presence, and the power of the Kingdom of God. This is an important part of what we need to be about as children of that Kingdom looking for its signs.

Growing potatoes

This is why this morning I want to talk to you about growing potatoes. This summer my husband and I decided that we were going to try to grow potatoes. So we read about it and then we went to the task. We learned that potatoes like to be buried deep.

Most importantly, we learned that here in the north, we would know when the potatoes would be ready for harvesting when the plant starts to die.

So, we watched for the signs of death in our potato plants in order to dig the potatoes out of the ground. They were absolutely delicious, if I should say so myself.

Looking for the signs of Hope

Like the potatoes, the church exists to remind us 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 and the 'not yet' of Advent." At the beginning of another church year, Beechy reminds us of the power of the story we hear again and again to draw us "more deeply" into our own lives. And then he expresses even more succinctly the promise of this short text:

"Stores opened on Thanksgiving Day. No time waste in shopping."

Let us look at the signs and resist the spirit of commercialism. This season becomes all about the shopping. I like an organization called the Advent Conspiracy.

The gospel offers an impossible possibility, a reality that transcends the everyday real, a Truth deeper than all else we have been told is true, a story that stretches beyond and encompasses all of our stories so as to give them meaning, integrity, and purpose.”¹

We ourselves read of these promises as people longing for the return of Jesus, our righteous Branch, the one who preached justice and embodied righteousness. One of the liturgical touches of great beauty during this season is the lighting of candles, usually associated with a different theme each week. These themes may put us even more deeply in the "mood" of Christmas, that is, if we miss the thread of *judgment* that runs through these prophetic readings as well. As Deborah A. Block observes, "The church may light its Advent candles for preparation, hope, joy and love, but the prophets sound justice and righteousness" (*Pastoral Perspective, Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol. 1*). We do prefer to hear of grace and peace rather than judgment, of course, but if there is never judgment, why would anything we do, matter? The rightness and wrongness, the good and the evil are present in our lives, and our choices give them moral weight, and cause our lives to matter even more. And our accumulated choices, the little ones as well as the big ones, shape our communities into centers of greed and self-interest, or into radiant centers of hope and love and peace.

Today, even the smallest of churches gives us glimpses of that hope. A church doesn't have to be a great big impressive mega-church to be a place of hope, of new life even in the face of what looks like death. There are some experts, of course, who have announced the "death" of mainline Protestantism, but there are others, like Diana Butler Bass, who are quietly taking a second look. It often takes experts a while to catch up with what's happening, to read the signs of the times, as we hear in today's reading from Luke, and what they're noticing is that here and there, little branches are springing up from what looked like a dead stump, little communities of faith rooted in justice and striving for righteousness, listening always for a word from the Still Speaking God, little churches growing into great churches, vibrant and full of heart.

There's a wonderful scene in the story of *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, when a boy named Dickon and his friend Mary explore a most wonderful hidden garden. It appears that many branches of the trees and the rose bushes are dead – the word "gray" is repeated again and again. But Dickon takes out a knife and cuts into a branch, where he finds "a shoot which looked brownish green instead of hard, dry gray," and he assures Mary that, deep inside, the tree is as "wick," as full of life and promise and hope as these two young people themselves. A church that "does what it's supposed to do," like a good king, a church that lives and breathes God's justice and God's righteousness – not *self*-righteousness, but *God's* righteousness – is a "wick" shoot, green and new on the inside, holding life and hope and promise no matter what

¹ David Lose, Luther Seminary

things may look like on the outside. In the midst of loneliness and despair, poverty and war, in the face of communal depression and personal heartache, these churches throw open their doors and their hearts to all of God's precious children and offer them a place, a community, where the quiet little flames of hope can be fanned into the fires of justice and peace, fanned into the warmth of spiritual homes for those who thought that there was no hope at all that they would ever find a place of such beauty and kindness, such tenderness and fierce hope, a welcome home in which to grow their faith by participating in the dream of God. These are churches that love worship and learning, churches that are open and generous, full of feeling, beautiful and just, churches that long for, and draw their strength from, the dream of God.

In so many ways, the world around us may appear, well, broken, especially at the end of a long and bitterly divisive political season: Relationships within families and communities, political parties and governmental processes, nations and economies and social systems have been damaged almost beyond repair. Even the earth itself cries out in weather systems that bring destruction more sudden than the mightiest of conquering armies, and we witness the same part of New York City that once burned, now under water. We wonder, too, if we'll ever be able to clean up the mess we have made in our rivers and oceans, the air and the ground itself. If we look around us, justice and righteousness do not appear to be the order of the day. Too many people, especially children, awaken each day not in safety and security but in fear for their lives; too many awaken to another day of hunger and anxiety, another day of suffering and pain. While we may be annoyed at having to take our shoes off to get through airport security, low-wage workers struggle just to provide shelter for their children, and mothers in Africa watch their children starve while our leaders discuss whether to cut our foreign aid.

When we read these words from the prophet, and listen to the story of the suffering of the people he addresses, we look up and around us then to see the suffering of the world in this Advent season. Gary W. Charles writes evocatively that "[t]he stories of Advent are dug from the harsh soil of human struggle and the littered landscape of dashed dreams. They are told from the vista where sin still reigns supreme and hope has gone on vacation" (*Homiletical Perspective, Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol. 1*). And Joanna M. Adams, writing in 2006, sounds as if she is talking about the world in this December six years later: "This Advent I feel an urgent need for the light that comes from God, and I do not think I am the only one....The clouds of anxiety about the future are hovering so low and close that you can barely see your hand in front of your face." She finds herself, like all of us in this Advent season, "holding on for dear life to the reassurance that God intends to make the world right again" ("Living by the Word" in *The Christian Century* November 28, 2006).

Advent. Perhaps the most beautiful of all the church seasons (or perhaps I say that because it's my favorite), Advent certainly brings out the poet not only in the prophet but in the commentators as well. Leonard Beechy calls Advent "Twilight time," drawing on the beautiful

Celtic tradition with its sense of "the time between the times," like the thin places where we feel even for a moment the presence of the holy. I was taught that we live our lives in the "already-but-not-yet" of God's reign, and Beechy connects that beautifully to this season: "The church exists to remind us 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 and the 'not yet' of Advent." At the beginning of another church year, Beechy reminds us of the power of the story we hear again and again to draw us "more deeply" into our own lives. And then he expresses even more succinctly the promise of this short text: "After a long and terrible night, said Jeremiah, a brilliant morning would dawn and a generation of God's people would wake up in safety in a place renamed 'justice.'" ("Living by the Word" in *The Christian Century* November 17, 2009). What would it be like to live in a place called "Justice"?

Whether we saw them with our own eyes or only on our television screens, it is certainly true that those images are hard to forget: the smoking rubble of the World Trade Center, a jagged scar on the earth in Eastern Pennsylvania, a gaping hole in the side of a burning Pentagon. Few of us had ever seen a great city in ruin, set afire by those who wanted to obliterate it. Other nations and their children have long known bombings and rubble, but this was the first time we in the United States saw our major cities under attack, with staggering destruction and loss of life; we have all felt less safe since September 11, 2001. It would be reasonable to say that our nation sustained a spiritual wound just as much as a physical one on that day, eleven years ago.

Perhaps then we can just begin to imagine how the people of Israel felt so long ago, when their city, their nation, was destroyed and their rulers and religious leaders carried off to a distant land. Our lectionary reading for this first Sunday of a new Church Year, this First Sunday of Advent, is from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Six hundred years before Jesus was born, the people of Israel were carried off to exile in Babylon, after many warnings by the prophets, including Jeremiah, that their failure to live faithfully, to live in justice and righteousness, would bring their downfall. They must have felt that they had been cut down, like a tree felled by the ax of a brutal and heartless oppressor. Once, under the great King David, Israel had been a formidable political and military power, and its people still remembered those glory days and longed for their return. Now, their king was no more, that glory was only a dim memory, and their hopes were dashed upon the rocks of the brutal history of empire.

It is right then, right there, in the midst of despair, that the prophet arises, the prophet who is also a poet with an imagination and a deep sense of call to proclaim, even in desolation, destruction, and loss, the promise of God's future taking shape beneath and behind it all. What is happening underneath, what we cannot see, is nevertheless real. Now, in the midst of the terrible suffering of the people, with Jerusalem destroyed and the temple in ruins, Jeremiah doesn't heap more misery on the people but instead offers them something to grasp, a hope to which they can cling. In fact, the prophet's voice takes such a dramatic turn that these chapters of Jeremiah are called the Book of Consolation, or the Book of Comfort.

The people need this consolation: if they had had mental health professionals in those days, they would have been inundated by people suffering from depression and perhaps even post-traumatic stress disorder. In any age and any situation of great suffering, depression is a hazard for those whose pain and loss are so great that they cannot imagine a future. Why look to the future, they might ask, if life holds the potential for so much pain? And yet, in the midst of communal depression, the prophet speaks a word of hope, a promise of what is yet to be. Jeremiah doesn't say that things might get better, or could be better, or that we should be optimistic about future possibilities. The prophet says that *the days are surely coming* – and you can count on it because God is the one making this promise.

What will this day look like? It will not be a day of revenge so those who are suffering can turn around and do damage to their own victims. There is a powerful video clip on a *Sojourners* blog by Jannette Jauregui (at [The Night Indianapolis Stood Still](#)) of Robert F. Kennedy speaking to a crowd in Indianapolis the night that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot. He had to share this terrible news with the stunned and anguished crowd, and it is believed that his words helped to keep a level of calm in that city while others went up in flames. He spoke against the division, the hatred, the violence and lawlessness that had the power to tear our nation apart in those turbulent times, recalling that he had lost a member of his own family to such violence and hatred. And then he lifted up instead "love and wisdom and compassion toward one another. A feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country." (He also recited the poem by Aeschylus, provided at the bottom of this reflection.)

This day promised by God will, however, be a day of justice, when the cities – the cities of ancient Israel and of modern Israel as well, the cities of our own nation, not just New York City and Washington, D.C., and New Orleans, but Cleveland and Detroit and St. Louis, too – will not be ruined, and "the land" will not be scarred by poverty and violence and greed. A day is surely coming, the prophet says, when all of God's children will live in peace. Everyone will have enough to eat, shelter and safety, the goods of life provided so generously by a loving God. The one who is yet to come, the one we await, will bring this justice and righteousness, and we order our lives differently today as we wait and hope.

Forty years after the Civil War ended, African Americans were still being mistreated and marginalized, and the musical *Ragtime* tells some of that story. At one point in the play, after a terrible tragedy has occurred, in the midst of injustice and outrage, the entire cast sings a hauntingly beautiful song, "Till We Reach that Day." Lynn Ahrens' lyrics sound like the words of an Old Testament prophet, magnificent and yet utterly simple and clear as they express the soul-deep longing of those who have suffered too much, for far too long. I think there is that kind of longing in the people of Israel long ago, a people, as Leonard Beechy puts it, "run over by ancient history" ("Living by the Word" in *The Christian Century* November 17, 2009). We sense that same longing today, in people who feel pushed down and pushed out, and even crushed beneath the heel of modern "empires" of greed, materialism, militarism, and nationalism. G. Lee Ramsey, Jr., suggests that the Arab Spring of 2011 and the recent Occupy Wall Street demonstrations might be seen as examples of people "publicly yearning, calling out for Jeremiah's prophesied justice and righteousness" ("First Sunday in Advent: Jeremiah 33:14-16" in *New Proclamation Year C 2013*).

So we begin the season of Advent with this reading from a time long ago, when a king in the line of the great King David was the hope of the people of Israel. It seems that the promises God is going to fulfill are as this-worldly as next-worldly, and the promise of a "Branch" that will "spring up for David" indicates that leadership is very important if human beings are going to participate in this great day. Gene M. Tucker notes that this promised one, like God, will focus on the justice of our "governmental, political concerns, both domestic and foreign," and he calls this "not just an ancient Israelite hope, but the Christian expectation at Advent as well" (*Preaching through the Christian Year C*). Ironically, their rulers had mostly let the people down in the past (even David wasn't perfect, no matter how much he is seen as the ideal king): William R. Herzog II observes that they'll still be included in this great "promised transformation" even though it was their fault that Judah had been carried off to exile ("First Sunday in Advent: Jeremiah 33:14-16" in *New Proclamation Year C 2006-2007*). Walter Brueggemann reminds us that rulers should "do what kings are supposed to do, namely, practice justice and righteousness" (*Exile and Homecoming: A Commentary on Jeremiah*). Do what is right this time, kings: *that's your job*.

Just as David symbolizes the good king, so Jerusalem holds so much power in our imaginations as the city of God: in verse nine of this same chapter of Jeremiah, God promises that "this city shall be to me a name of joy...." How will Jerusalem bring God joy? According to Dianne Bergant, we hear in our text this week that Jerusalem, "the city whose name means 'foundation of peace,' is here given a new name, 'the Lord our justice'" (*Preaching the New Lectionary Year C*). Justice and joy are inextricably linked. We're not just talking about bricks and mortar here: Richard Ascough reminds us that "God does not dwell in buildings but is with God's people." And this is true in every age and every condition: suffering can be a learning experience, instructive for the people of God, even when it feels like God is absent. With the exile, Ascough writes, "A new understanding of covenant with God was forged from the experience and a new relationship developed. For Christians, this has happened once again through the person and work of Jesus" (First Sunday in Advent, *New Proclamation Year C, 2000-2001*).

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Advent is a time of waiting, filled with hope, for the One who is to come. When we live in love and act in hope, when we gather again and again at the table to remember what Jesus did and to know that Jesus is with us once again, we are people of Advent hope. We tend to think of the

month of December as the Christmas season, and the secular world ironically reinforces that premature celebration, if only to entice us to early and excessive spending. But Advent is a different kind of time, just as we in the church are on a different "calendar" from the rest of the world. Deborah Block claims that this "alternative New Year's Day affirms time as God's home and workplace, not as a calendar of accumulating years but as a movement toward fulfillment, not a day for self-improvement resolutions but for community reaffirmation of trust in God's promises, past, present, and future" (Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol. 1*). The task of the preacher here, on the near edge of Advent, is to inspire the congregation to give our lives each day to God's own dream of compassion and peace, and to persist in living our lives in hope.

If we would stop during this Advent, not Christmas, season, and look around at our communities, where would we see justice and righteousness? How easy is it to miss the people who awaken each day not in safety but in fear for their lives? While we fear violence ourselves from terrorists, are we missing the "slow-motion violence" of economic injustice that visits injury, pain, loneliness and hunger upon those who suffer the effects of greed and negligence, day in and day out? What is the deepest longing of our hearts, and are those longings in line with the longings of the heart of God?