

## **JEREMIAH 33:14-16**

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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."

## **LUKE 21:25-36**

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. <sup>26</sup>People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup>Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup>Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

<sup>29</sup>Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; <sup>30</sup>as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. <sup>31</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. <sup>33</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>34</sup>"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, <sup>35</sup>like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup>Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

## **How Do You Spell Hope? December 2, 2018**

I remember a commercial many years ago whose tagline was, "How do you spell relief?" I think it was for an antacid like Tums or Roloids. I don't know why this reading today from Jeremiah got me thinking about it. Maybe because it too is about looking for relief as a nation and a people and maybe even as a faithful seeker of God. The people in the story have been under siege and threat of destruction by the Chaldeans and have been living in fear and longing. They have lost so much and are living in fear and have forgotten the promises of God. Something that happens to all of us at one time or another. It is certainly a story that we could hear on the news today of smaller nations and peoples being destroyed by their larger more powerful neighbors. It certainly has me wondering how I would feel if I were living in Palestine or Syria or Yemen.

And into all that fear and threat, Jeremiah reminds them that God will fulfill the promises that God has made to the nation and will bring forth a righteous Branch who will bring about justice and righteousness. Who will bring relief...but more importantly, Hope! Hope for a future where all people and creation will live in peace. And as we enter the season of Advent, I think we too are hoping for something as well. We may not be able to put words to it yet, it may just be a feeling way down in your soul right now, but we are looking and watching and waiting for it. We need a little hope as well, don't we? Maybe all creation is longing for Hope too.

It reminds me of this dog we just started fostering. He is an eleven-year-old black lab mix, who is big and beautiful. He's a watchdog! Which means that he will sit there and watch you eat and hope something falls on the floor! He's not all that interested in barking at strangers or earning his keep. He's had a rough life and lived most of his life at the end of a chain and never really learned how to be a dog. But we love him. And maybe he is feeling a bit of hope again as well this first Advent with pastor Jim and miss Anna.

But maybe we also need to remember that God said, He will raise up a Branch. He will give someone the strength and courage to do what must be done. Someone who will be a light to the nations and a solace for the meek. Someone who will abide with us and in us, showing us how to show forth God's love for all the world. And for those of us who believe, that Branch is Jesus. That we spell relief, J.E.S.U.S. But I don't think God means for us to stand idly by waiting for Jesus to take care of everything because we too are Branches of God and maybe God is calling us to rise up in hope as well!

I read the most wonderful devotion the other day by Elsa Cook where she shared this story by the Rev. William Barber. He told it like this. "When I was growing up in eastern North Carolina, I used to love to sit in my grandmama's kitchen and listen to her sing as she made dinner. Whenever she was done cooking, she'd give me a plate to eat. Then she and some of the other sisters from the church would make up some to-go plates and, with their aprons still on, they'd head out the door to visit the sick and shut-in. 'We going to hope somebody,' Grandmama would say."

He loved his grandmama, but he was convinced she had really bad grammar. He knew well that hope isn't a verb. That is until you and I need it to be. The rules of grammar must change because a child of the resurrection needs it to change. Jesus sides with Grandmama. Hope is a verb, he says, that pulls you up from the depths of despair, shakes you from your pain and points toward life. It's not just an idea, but it's what pushes you out the door to say that this isn't the end. This isn't all there is and there is justice to be done. So, head out the door and go hope on somebody."

Hope is our theme this morning if you haven't figured that out already and I thought I would share a few stories that have brought me great hope this week and I hope they will for you too. We live in troubled times as well and sometimes it is just good to hear that Hope is still alive and active in the world.

This story was sent to me by one of my students whose pastor wrote and shared with her. I didn't get his name, but he was happy for folks to pass it on. He said, "Saturday as I reflected on the week, I discovered a small article tucked in the middle pages of the news. It was the story of Aubrey Fontenot of Houston, Texas. Mr. Fontenot's eight-year-old son, Jordan, was being bullied at school by an 11-year-old. The father went to the school to request intervention which was promised. The next week the bullying resumed. The father returned to the school a second time to meet with administrators and with the mother of the child who was bullying Jordan. As the father listened to the mother's description of her son, he requested her permission to meet with the eleven-year-old.

At the meeting, Mr. Fontenot listened to the boy. He learned that the bully was struggling because he wore dirty clothes and had torn tennis shoes. He and his mother were homeless. To divert attention from his own insecurities, he was bullying younger children. The father then took the young fellow shopping...bought him some new shoes and proper clothes. He also raised money to help the youngster and his mother have better living conditions. By listening to this youngster headed for deeper troubles, the father was able to convert him from being a tormentor to being a friend to his son.

The article didn't mention anything about Mr. Fontenot's religious beliefs; however, I believe this father was acting as Jesus has called us to act. We are to love the enemy; pray for those who harm us, and return good for evil. No one of us can change the world, but if more of us were God's instruments to change the course of one person as Mr. Fontenot did...the world would change."

*He came down that we may have hope; He came down that we may have hope; He came down that we may have hope; Hallelujah forevermore.*

Pastor Jill Duffield who is the editor of The Presbyterian Outlook shared this beautifully hopeful story in her commentary this week. She said, "On election night last month, I was flying home and waiting for my connecting flight in the bustling Atlanta airport. I sat alone eating my dinner, watching pundits predict outcomes, seeing the "breaking news" banner when polls closed. I looked forward to being obliviously in the air when definitive numbers were announced. I wondered if my hope for a less politically divided life together bordered on delusional. Behind me sat a woman working on her laptop. A young man in a janitor's uniform came to empty the trash can adjacent to the woman's table. She struck up a conversation with him. Her accent revealed her home before she told him she was from Minnesota. She asked him if he was in school. No. He had to work. He had a son on the way. "How exciting," she exclaimed. "You have no idea how much your heart will expand." She had an 18-month-old at home, she said. They chatted and eventually she got the young man's name and address so that she could send him baby clothes her son had outgrown. "Nothing fancy," she said. "But good for every day." He thanked her, told her to have a safe flight. She wished him well. They went back to their respective work.

I got up to go to my gate but not before stopping to thank the lady with the thick Minnesota accent. I told her I was moved by her kindness. She said, "We need to be kind to each other." As the "breaking news" boomed about red and blue races, I agreed. Neither earth nor heaven shook, nothing went dark, but that small exchange brought about a seismic shift in my attitude. Their shared humanity over impending new life bolstered my faith and gave a glimpse of love and unity that is too often unseen. It gave me hope that redemption isn't as far away as I feared."

*He came down that we may have hope; He came down that we may have hope; He came down that we may have hope; Hallelujah forevermore.*

I want to leave you with one last personal story whose memory leaves me with deep feelings of love and hopefulness. It happened at Thanksgiving 3 years ago. As we gathered with family for our Thanksgiving meal my granddaughter Caitlyn, who was six-years-old at the time, was dressed as a pilgrim, wanted to sing a song for us as part of the blessing. It was something they had sung at school and it went to the tune for *We Gather Together*. We were all delighted of course.

Well, Friday morning, we sat down together at the piano and I plunked out 'We Gather Together' which she had never heard, and then Caitlyn sang her thanksgiving version, and then we sang the hymn together, which led us to singing Christmas songs. We went through several songs from the Readers Digest Christmas book. She sang with all her heart and even when she didn't know the songs she sang along. She told me that, "She didn't really know all the songs but that I was such a good singer she could easily follow me." She said I had a real 'God Voice.' Now there's a sermon for you! And if you are ever feeling hopeless, sit down and sing with a 6-year-old sometime. Or any child for that matter.

While we were working our way through, "*What Child is this, who came to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping? Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?*" my oldest daughter eased up behind us and began to sing along in her sweet soprano voice. "*This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing; Haste, haste to bring him laud, the Babe, the Son of Mary.*" I sat there nearly in tears, barely able to keep playing and singing as the three of us, three generations, sang together. And all I could think was, "You see it is still possible for us to all sing the same songs. Songs of love and compassion. Songs of mercy and grace. Songs of God's presence and coming into the world to bring hope for all."

And God calls each and every one of us to spread that hope and love into the world. And I can't help but be reminded of Caitlyn's words to me when she said, "I don't really know the songs, but you are such a good

singer, I can easily follow you.” Yes, Hallelujah, that’s it isn’t it? We must be such good singers of hope into the world that those who want to sing along can easily follow.

Jesus will come to us as a small child bringing us the most powerful gift in a world of darkness...Hope. As you begin your Advent journey, I wish you good singing, as you watch and listen for the Christ Child who has come, who is coming, and who will come again. So, put on your apron, grab a plate to go, a song to sing, a story to tell, and go ‘Hope’ somebody in Jesus’ name! In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Let us pray.

### **Prayers of the People**

Loving God, as we gather on this day of Advent Hope, we confess that sometimes our hope is in tatters and we fear that the hope we have will soon disappear. And yet, if we will be still and listen and lift up our eyes from the weary roads of despair we enjoy traveling on, we will see you in the most unexpected and surprising ways. For this is how you come to us isn’t it. In the ordinary ways of life. At work or play. In the kitchen while making dinner. In the drive-through at McDonald's. On a walk in the woods or the mall. In a song from a small child that cuts to your heart and opens your spirit. Thank you loving God that you came into the world as a small and defenseless child and yet stand as our hope for all eternity. And that you will come again to fulfill your promise of a new heaven and a new earth where justice, mercy, and peace will reign.

As we begin our journey in this season of Advent, help us to renew our faith, renew our commitment to you, and renew our covenant to love our neighbors, especially the strangers and refugees, as we love ourselves.

We pray, O God, for all those around the world and here at home who are living in fear and sadness due to war, terrorist attacks, senseless shootings, fires, floods, and earthquakes. We grieve with them and for them. Draw near loving father and comfort those who mourn and those who are afraid and show us how we can ease these wounds to our sisters and brothers. Guide our nations and leaders in your way and let there be a movement towards peace, towards dialog, towards compromise, towards compassion, until your kingdom comes.

We remember this day those in our own communities and families and we lift them to you now in prayers both spoken and silent as well as those prayers that we cannot even put words to. Hear us now precious Lord...

We rejoice in this advent season Holy One. Surprise us and provoke us loving savior, as we watch and wait, as we lift up our heads and see the world around us, as we look for you in each and every encounter of our simple and ordinary lives. We know that something is coming and we want our hearts to be ready to receive the wonderful gifts that you bring us. Gifts of love and compassion, gifts of listening and patience, gifts of mercy and peace. Renew our hope we pray, as we give you our hearts in prayer using the simple prayer you taught us saying....