

11/28/21 SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

O God, as we witness the flicker of the first candle of Advent, the candle of hope, we make our faith confession that YOU are our hope. In you, God, we find hope as we look to you for much-needed wisdom, humility, generosity, guidance and peace. Just as the biblical stories tell us about your faithful people in exile, we can sometimes feel as if we're in various kinds of "exiles" as well – from relationships, or hopes and dreams, expectations. Sometimes it can feel as if we're exiled in our own land as we encounter strong opinions and disagreement, polarization and division among our friends, neighbors and sometimes family. Help us to listen well and to be your faithful followers, to reflect your light and your love into the world.

We offer our prayers for the world, God. Be present to people in places where a new variant of the virus is spreading quickly. Be with medical workers and caretakers of those who are sick, grant them perseverance and compassion. Be present to people who are displaced from their homes out of fear or insecurity. Go with them on their search for safety and be with those who meet them along the way. Give them wisdom and compassion. Be present to people in places where there is political and civil unrest. Give them courage and let your light of justice shine through.

We thank you God for hearing our prayers. We offer prayers of thanks and praise – for your good gifts, for your presence with us and with all of your people, through the Holy Spirit. Thank you that Judy's mother, Liz was able to move and get settled this week at Kidron-Bethel; we're grateful for that facility and for those who work and live there. Continue to hold Liz and her family in the palm of your hand. We continue to pray, God, for retirement facilities and their staff, residents and boards of directors at Schowalter Villa, Pine Village and for others where our loved ones live and work. And we pray especially for those closest to home at Bethesda as they continue to consider options and decisions.

God, we thank you for the life of Carol Friesen, Jenny Fast's mother. Thank you for the beautiful service of remembrance that Jenny, John and their extended families had yesterday in honor and memory of Carol. We thank you also for Harry Koehn, brother-in-law of Janine Peters and DJ Freeman, whose service was held yesterday in Greensberg. Continue to comfort these families and bring them joy through their memories and their faith.

We pray for our students and teachers as they head into these last few weeks of school now between Thanksgiving and Christmas break. Help them to stay focused and give their best efforts as it gets closer to the end of this first semester. We thank you God for schools, for the opportunities to learn together and that we can be having in-person school.

God we pray for those who may be feeling sad, lonely, discouraged or depressed as we enter this holiday season. We acknowledge that it can feel like there's a lot of pressure at this time of the year to be happy or be excited or just to have certain feelings that we may or may not really

be experiencing. Give us courage, God, to slow down, to contemplate, to wait patiently, to realign our expectations so that they match your long and steady view of hope for the world.

We ask you to bless the rest of our worship time together this morning. Thank you for your presence with us here, in this place, and everyplace we go. We pray with hope, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

CONFESSION AND ASSURANCE – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Throughout Advent, we will have words of both confessing our sin, weakness, and need, with a moment for silent reflection and words of hope and assurance.

Please join me in the litany that you can find in your bulletins. “The Righteous Branch” is an image of Christ that we will find in our scripture reading in Jeremiah.

(See litany in the bulletin)

OFFERING PRAYER – (BASED ON VT 1022)

God who is our righteousness,

Just as you are faithful to us,
we pray that we can be faithful to you:

Faithful with our time and energy,
faithful with our possessions and our wealth.

Receive these gifts by your grace.

Multiply and use them,
through the power of the Holy Spirit
to make real your reign
of love, justice, and peace in this place and beyond.

SERMON: “GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS” – PASTOR CALEB Jeremiah 33:14-16

Sometimes in life things feel hopeless. Maybe it’s what we hear in the news, or maybe it’s personal tragedy.

One tragedy I witnessed was when two teenage boys from the neighborhood where I lived in Honduras were shot by members of a vigilante group right across the street from where I was teaching a computer class. I heard the gunshots and knew this did not sound like firecrackers! I went into the other room and heard another volunteer sobbing, “they killed Ariel!”

Ariel was one of the two youths – and I had just bumped into him the evening before. It was strange to think just like that his young life was no more. Adding to the grief and the hopeless reality of violence that the community lived with was that no one believed in any kind of just judicial process. Even the police were afraid of the vigilante group.

The local media and broader community would label the youth as “delinquents” and blame them for their own deaths.

The one consolation in this tragedy was the overwhelming support of church and neighborhood members as people filled two rented buses and many pickup truck beds to form a procession for the two burials. People sang together as each of the boys was laid to rest.

How does one find hope in the midst of tragedy? I learned some insights from Karen, the mother of Ariel. But first, let’s learn from Jeremiah, the prophet of hope in the midst of tragedy.

JEREMIAH

Some have called Jeremiah the “weeping prophet” because of the grief he expressed for the tumultuous times his people were living through. Jeremiah’s prophetic career coincided with the time period in which the nation’s fall to the Babylonian empire was imminent. The most traumatic moment was when the city of Jerusalem was under siege.

There is plenty of doom and gloom in Jeremiah. There are also words of bold hope, maybe crazy hope given the circumstances. Since our scripture reading was very short, I’ll give a little summary of what comes before it. What we see in these pages are words that alternate from judgment and doom to hope of restoration.

In the previous chapter, Jeremiah has an offer to buy a field from a relative, and he goes ahead and makes the purchase. This is crazy, because the Babylonians are at the doorstep, and the land will not be worth anything during an exile. Jeremiah’s purchase is a visible and costly expression of hope that his people again will live in the land.

In chapter 33 we move again to more doom. One of the challenging parts of reading Jeremiah is the fact that Jeremiah, along with other prophets, saw the violence of the Babylonians as an expression of God’s anger, because his people had not followed through on their part of their covenant relationship with God.

In verse 4, Jeremiah hears God say: “I have hidden my face from this city because of all their wickedness.” There aren’t more terrifying words Jeremiah could have prophesied.

But without missing a beat, God continues in the very next verse: “I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security.”

Jeremiah prophesies that there will some day be joyful processions to present offerings in the temple, with the worship song: *“Give thanks to the Lord Almighty, for the Lord is good; his love endures forever.”*

Then in verses 14-16 – our focus verses – Jeremiah promises the coming of a “Righteous Branch” who will “execute justice and righteousness in the land.” The NIV says simply that the Righteous Branch will *“do what is just and right.”*

Exile will end the dynasty of the descendants of King David. What we have is the hope that this dynasty will eventually be restored, and the people again will live in safety and right relationships.

This promise shows up two times in Jeremiah. The first time, in Chapter 23, Jeremiah says this ruler descended from David will have the name “the Lord is our righteousness,” and in chapter 33, this is the name given to the whole city: “the Lord is our righteousness.” It’s an awesome hope expressing a profound imagination of God’s goodness.

JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

The word “righteous” is kind of a fancy way of saying “good.” We could go farther and say that to be “righteous” is to live in right relationship with others.

One of the things you will notice if you read the Old Testament enough is that the words “justice” and “righteousness” often go together. We’d see it even more if we could read Hebrew, because the English translations are not always consistent. These word siblings are “mishpat” and “tsedaqah.”

“Tsedaqah” is most often defined as “righteousness” (like the Righteous Branch, or name “the Lord is our righteousness”). “Mishpat” often refers to a judgment intended to correct a wrong or to a just cause. Tim Mackie from the BibleProject defines “*tsedaqah*” as honoring the image of God in others,” while “*mishpat*” is an action or needed action to create *tsedaqah*.¹

Let’s take a moment to look at a few biblical verses to help our understanding of these two concepts. You’ll notice that in the slides I highlight these two Hebrew words or related words where they appear. Hebrew words are almost always built around three consonants, which I have in a different color.

Consider this description of justice and righteousness from Jeremiah 22:3:

This is what the Lord says: Do what is just [mishpat] and right [tsedaqah]. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

Or from Psalm 146:7-9, describing God’s goodness. We spoke these words in last week’s service:

*He upholds the cause of [does mishpat for]
the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.*

The Lord sets prisoners free,

⁸ *the Lord gives sight to the blind,*

the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,

the Lord loves the righteous [tsaddiqim]

⁹ *The Lord watches over the foreigner*

¹ See <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/justice/>

*and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.*

Notice the description that fills out the meaning of these words “righteousness” or “justice.” It’s about caring for those who are vulnerable: the oppressed, the foreigners, orphans, or widows.

Finally, consider Proverbs 31:8-9:

*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.*

⁹*Speak up and judge fairly; [sh’phat tsedeq]
defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

What patterns do you notice? These words of justice and righteousness are more than just avoiding doing harm to others; they are about standing up for those unable to stand up for themselves.

This is the same vision of justice and righteousness in the words of hope in Jeremiah. One of the tricky things about reading biblical prophecy is to know just how literally do you take the promises to be?

From my perspective, the following verses (19-22) promise things that simply haven’t come to pass in human history the way Jeremiah’s audience expected. Jeremiah seems to promise an everlasting line of kings descended from David. But the monarchy of David’s line never was restored after the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon.

Secondly, Jeremiah promises that there will always be priests to offer sacrifices in the temple. The temple was rebuilt and sacrifices resumed, but eventually the Romans destroyed the second temple, and there haven’t been sacrifices since.

Is it possible that Jeremiah was spot on about the *hope* that he was expressing, even if the hopeful outcomes didn’t turn out quite as he might have expected? We too, who learn how to live our lives in hope, sometimes have to adjust our expectations of outcomes, while maintaining hope.

Christians see this Righteous Branch as a reference to Christ. Jeremiah’s promise was fulfilled in the person of Jesus. Jesus lived out the perfect righteousness and justice of God, as this Righteous Branch is said to do.

Jesus’ story took a strange turn; his righteousness brought him to the cross, a hopeless tragedy. Yet because God rose Jesus from the grave, we have confidence that God’s goodness always prevails. This pattern of resurrection is built into the fabric of reality, and gives us reason to always have hope. God is in the business of resurrection.

RESUMING ARIEL STORY

Earlier I described the tragedy of the death of two youths. The mother of Ariel is Karen, a woman of remarkable faith. Sometime after this tragedy, Karen invited me to eat at her house. She served a delicious meal and shared about her family as we broke tortillas together.

On the wall was a large portrait of Ariel. Ariel worried her. He spent all his time away from home and had a conflict with his sister. Karen managed to reconcile them by giving each one a gift, telling them it was from the other.

As she recalled her grief, she shared, "I don't blame God, nor myself." One day as she was washing clothes, she felt the Spirit tell her that her son was with God.

This was the hope that she needed. Over different times of interacting with her, I could tell that Karen understood that Christianity was not about following rules; it was about a change in heart. I marveled at her lack of bitterness and her expression of hope.

IMAGINATION

The theme throughout our season of Advent is "*daring to imagine*." Some Christians think of imagination foreign to true faith. Imagination is what a child does. Austin is full of imagination, and from our adult perspective, he imagines things that aren't "real," be they monsters, or a very real construction project unfolding in our backyard.

What does faith have to do with imagination? I believe imagination is part of the language of hope, especially when we have to dig into what will keep us going without certainty or science-textbook kind of information.

Jeremiah and other prophets imagined God's restoration after the tragedy of exile. They didn't foresee exactly how it was going to be. What gave their words enduring power over the centuries was their bold imagination of God's goodness and God's restoration.

Biblical hope is not based on confidence of a particular positive outcome. It is not the same thing as optimism. Jeremiah had zero optimism that Jerusalem would avoid falling to Babylon. Biblical hope rests in the confidence that no matter what happens, *God is good*. That's why we need a capacity to *imagine God's goodness* in whatever we are going through.

Bryan Stevenson is an attorney who worked to save the lives of a number of inmates on death row, some of whom were innocent of the crime. Stevenson also wrote the book *Just Mercy*.

In an interview, he said, "*hopelessness is the enemy of justice... if we allow ourselves to become hopeless, we become part of the problem.*"²

We need imagination for how things can be better in order to nourish an abiding hope. The interview came to the point that we have to train ourselves to hope the same way that we train our muscles to become stronger.

CONCLUSION

How can we train our spirits to have a deeper sense of hope and to be able to picture God's goodness?

² See <<https://onbeing.org/programs/bryan-stevenson-finding-the-courage-for-whats-redemptive/>>

One suggestion is to spend time outdoors, even as the weather gets colder, or at least looking outdoors. This is a time of year when plants are dying. We have to wait until spring for new branches to sprout, but by hope we know that this is coming.

We can look at the sky, especially the marvelous stars at night or the sunrise or sunset, and be reminded that we are so small.

Not in such a way as to be completely terrified, but to marvel at the glory of God revealed in a universe such as ours. God's covenant with day and night is solid and unchanging. In Jeremiah 33:19, God promises a covenant with God's people that is just as solid and unchanging as the regularity of day and night.

In the same way, in this ultimate sense, we can rest knowing that God takes care of us, and works through our best and faltering efforts, even though we don't know the future or certain outcomes.

Let's imagine God's goodness, faithfulness, and righteousness.

Let's work together to train our hope-muscles.

Let's build the kind of hope that will allow us to act with justice and righteousness.

BENEDICTION (*LEADER*, FALL 2021)

Stand up,

raise your heads,

reach toward the light,

wait in growing hope.

Dare to imagine the goodness of our God.