

Jeremiah 33:10-18  
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### **In This Place**

They have seen it coming, or at least they have had every warning that it was coming. For centuries, prophets have been telling the kings and the people that everything is going crumble. They have been too unfaithful for too long. They have placed their faith in easy allegiances with foreign kings. They have hedged their bets by worshiping other gods. And what they have failed to see is that those kings and those gods have no concern for Judah's wellbeing, no vested interest in her people thriving. Israel to the north fell years ago and now Judah and her beloved capital city of Jerusalem stand on the verge of collapse. At the time when Jeremiah is writing, the Babylonians have surrounded Jerusalem for over a year. The city is under siege. The invading army is waiting them out, starving them out, while the people build barricades with anything they can get their hands on. Jeremiah is in prison. The situation is as dire as it has ever been, and into this dire moment, God speaks a word of hope and promise. [Read Jeremiah 33:10-18]

I'm the first to admit that the season of Advent is weird. Especially in a year when the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas Day is shorter, when there is a push to squeeze in every bit of holly jolliness as quickly as we can, this holy season of waiting seems odd and strange. Like many years, the rush isn't only about the number of shopping days. There is a palpable sense of needing the comfort, the joy of Christmas not in a few weeks, but right now. The song "We Need a Little Christmas," from *Mame* remains one of my favorites, and there is a strong pull in me to haul out the holly, slice up the fruitcake, put candles on every flat surface, unwrap every Christmas decoration, drink all the spiced cider, sing every carol and do everything in my power to drown out and push back against all that is sad and wrong and broken in the world. But I think there is something important about resisting the urge to race straight to Christmas. I think there is something urgently necessary about this

season of Advent. Yes, I could use a little Christmas, but I also suspect that we need—that I need—a little Advent right now, too.

Jeremiah is known for his voicing of God's lament and anger over all that is sad and wrong and broken in Israel and Judah. He plays the role of Old Testament prophet to a T. He has a thundering voice, I'm guessing, with fiery eyes and a long scraggly beard to match. He pleads to God on the people's behalf and preaches God's words of disappointment and judgment to those same people. And yet throughout the book, even as Jerusalem teeters on the brink of utter defeat, Jeremiah repeatedly shares words of hope, too. Speaking the word that he has heard from God, Jeremiah insists that this is not Judah's last chapter, that at some point the nation will be restored. I would imagine that such a promise might be hard to trust when food rations are dwindling and death has become an all-too-familiar companion. Such a promise might be difficult to hang on to when the one remaining man of God, the one who has the ear of the Lord of All, the one who gives voice to all that this God has in mind is languishing in a prison cell.

And the worst is yet to come. At this point the people are still holding on in the midst of Jerusalem. Exile is still in the offing, and yet, God promises a new beginning, a king that will lead with righteousness and religious leaders who will offer worship with integrity. Yes, the people of Judah will be driven from their homes and sent to live in a foreign land. The desolation they see with their own eyes will not magically disappear, but it will end:

In this place that is waste, without human beings or animals, and in all its towns there shall again be pasture for shepherds resting their flocks. In the towns of the hill country ....flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 33: 12-13, NRSV

*In this place*...not in a better place or among another people. In this place of cookie crumbs and bruised hearts, this place of loving homes and strained relationships, this place of hard-won peace and war without end, *in this place*, God promises restoration. This restoration, this new beginning will be marked by something as simple, essential, and relatable as sheep grazing and a shepherd's concerning herself with something as mundane as counting every last member of her flock. *In this place* that stands barren and empty, life that is good and full will return. One can almost hear the bleating sheep and smell the wet wool of happy sheep. God has said it will be so, and God promises to make it so. And it is this promise that informs and shapes their waiting. It is this promise that informs and shapes our waiting, too.

Because the season of Advent is not simply a countdown to Christmas. It is not only about getting ready to celebrate Jesus' coming into the world. It is these things, but it is also a time when we pause and acknowledge that things are not as they should be, that the world around us is abounding in hurt, pain, strife, and grief. It is a time when we admit that we struggle, too, that grief and pain and disappointment are real. And it is the time when we tell the stories, not only of that precious baby and shepherds and wise men and a brave young woman and a gentle faithful man, but also stories about God's people who faced defeat and devastation in the thick of God's beloved city, the very people to whom the promise was first made. To tell these stories is to remind ourselves just what kind of world Jesus was born into, just what kind of world Jesus came to save, just what kind of world Jesus is still saving even now.

And to tell these stories is to remember the covenant God made with the people, because it is the same covenant God makes with us. "The days are surely coming," God tells us. *Surely* coming. And so we look and wait and live as people who trust the promise to be true, not because we are particularly good or special, but because the one who makes the promise is. But trusting the promise can be a

struggle. We have seen it with the people of Israel and Judah. In the face of temptation and despair, they forget who they are and whose they are. And we can sympathize, can't we? When there is an abundance of bad news, we can begin to believe that that such news is the only news, because those surely-coming days seem so far away. We need something we can see, touch, smell, and taste, something tangible to hang on to. So we light candles and sing "Come Thou Long-expected Jesus." We listen closely for the splashing water and celebrate baptisms. We gather at this table and taste the bread and smell the juice. The sacraments—baptism and communion—are not magic tricks, rather they are outward signs of inward grace, grace that lasts, grace that does not end. They are visible and tangible reminders of this God who loves us and redeems us not because of who we are or what we do, but because of who God is and what God does. God creates. God loves. God saves. God redeems. Again and again and again. That is who God is. That is what God does, no matter how often we forget, no matter how far away we wander. When we gather around the font and around the table, when we pour the water and break the bread, we can see and smell and touch and feel and remember that God in Christ is among us, *in this place*. In water, bread, and cup, God points us to that long ago promise, the promise that remains for us and for all. In these sacraments, we are reminded that like those beloved children of ancient Israel and Judah, we are people of the promise, people who are longing for the world to be redeemed, people who are doing our best to trust that the latest headlines are not the only news. By the grace of God, we are people who believe that not all promises are destined to be broken, people who dare to proclaim with our words and with our lives that the days are surely coming when God's promise will be fulfilled in this place and in every place.

Thanks be to God. Amen.